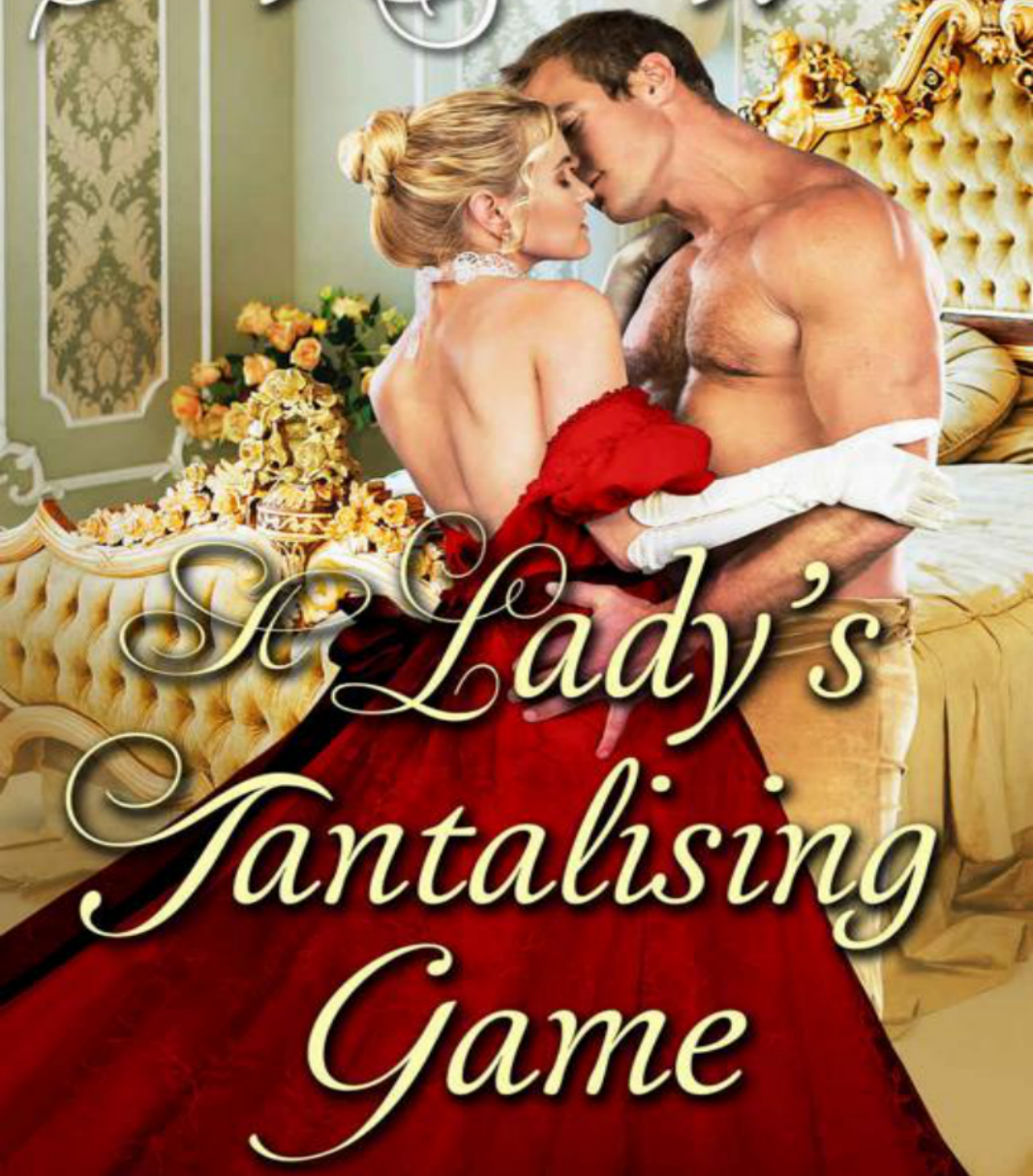


Emily Honeyfield



The Lady's  
Tantalising  
Game

# **A Lady's Tantalising Game**

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

EMILY HONEYFIELD

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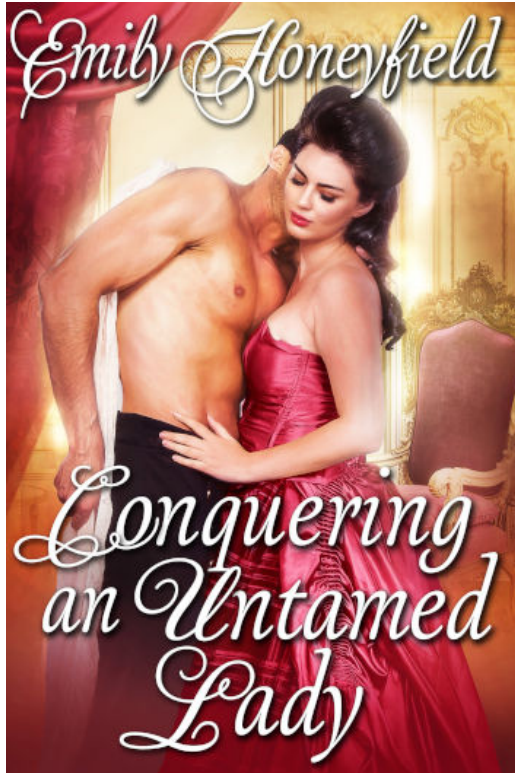
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# A Lady's Tantalising Game

## Introduction

Lady Isabella Finch, daughter of the Duke of Coventry, has grown tired of her dreary life indoors. Being the fiery woman she is, she cannot abide by all the petty rules and regulations enforced upon ladies of her class. One fateful day, when the son of a talented local blacksmith is delivering swords to her father, she feels tempted by his seductive beauty and decides to play a tantalising game... Will a simple man offer her the most arousing romance of all or will he destroy her reputation and her family's name forever?

During his visit, Jasper Burnet, son of the local blacksmith, instantly bonds with the Duke of Coventry over their shared love of fencing. When the Duke offers him a position at Highbury, he accepts right away. What he could never imagine was the enthralling chapter that was about to begin between him and the Duke's scandalous daughter. He knows he is playing with fire with the feisty Isabella and yet, he can't resist his burning desire... Will he withstand the pressure of a high born Lady's wicked plans or will this untamed affair break his heart forever?

Isabella and Jasper are worlds apart. Nonetheless, a powerful attraction beyond what either of them have ever experienced, is slowly uniting them... How can they ever hope to be together, especially when Isabella is being courted by a proper gentleman?



There is no place in this world for a daring Lady and a restless blacksmith's son, and yet, they are willing to risk it all. Will they withstand the pressure mounting against them or will their lustful passion dissolve before they surrender to one another?

# Chapter 1

*Shropshire, England, 1815*

Jasper Burnet walked quickly into the blacksmith's shop, at the rear of the tall, red brick building, in the small village of Collstock. There was a familiar hiss and steam rising in the air around him. Jasper smiled. This was the sound and smell of his childhood and beyond; he would know it anywhere.

A wizened man with fiery red hair woven with silver strands was bent over the anvil, sharpening a sword. His father's face was tight with concentration. Jasper hung back, knowing better than to break his focus. His father had taught him never to speak until he had completed the task at hand. He had only done it once, as a small child, and rued the day. He had been soundly berated.

He cast an eye over the shop as his father worked, spying his good friend, Timothy Slade, hard at work in the opposite corner making some horseshoes. Timothy was apprenticed to his father and had shown diligence and skill. But he wasn't allowed to forge the swords and weapons yet; he had to make do with horseshoes and the like. Timothy was still learning his trade from the master.

*One day all of this will be mine, he thought slowly. I hardly know if I feel pleased or burdened by the knowledge.*

"Jasper," said his father, straightening at last, placing the gleaming sword upon a workbench. "There you are. Are you ready for your assignment?"

Jasper smiled eagerly. "I am more than ready, Pa," he replied. "I have already saddled the horse. I can leave for Highbury Manor whenever all the swords are ready."

His father nodded. "The last one is finally done." He grimaced slightly. "His Grace wanted quite a lot this time. A whole consignment of swords. I have been working around the clock, but it shall be worth it. The Duke of Coventry always pays inordinately well." He paused, his eyes narrowing. "I am trusting you with this task, Jasper. It might seem like a simple job to deliver the weapons, but there is more to it than that. You shall have to deliver them to His Grace personally, so you must watch your tongue and be extremely deferential."

Jasper nodded, just managing to stop himself from rolling his eyes. His father always primly lectured him about being appropriately servile towards the nobility. Josiah Burnet was a man who deeply believed in the order of the classes.

Not that Jasper didn't, exactly – he just didn't believe that the nobility were all superior people just by the accident of their birth. He had seen quite a few over the years who seemed just as dull-witted as any common man could be.

But, of course, it wasn't just about the fact that Alexander Finch, the Duke of Highbury, was so high born. It was about the fact he was an extremely well-paying and loyal customer of Burnet's Blacksmiths. His father had been making swords for His Grace for many years now and the old man always returned for more.

Along with everyone in Shropshire, he knew that Josiah Burnet was the best maker of swords in the county. In Jasper's opinion, his father was probably the best in the whole country. But then, he was biased.

Jasper took a deep breath. “Of course, Pa. I shall not give His Grace any cause for complaint.”

Josiah Burnet slowly smiled. “Good. It is worth it, as I said. And His Grace is a good man, Jasper, as well as a loyal customer. He is sure to greet you warmly and to want to speak with you at length. He always does whenever I have delivered swords to Highbury Manor over the years.”

He started to gather up the swords, handing them to his son. Jasper admired the excellent workmanship as he took them. There was an even amount of short court swords for the art of fencing, known as foils, and the heavy cavalry swords, known as sabres.

He ran an expert eye over them. He knew his weapons well – he had been practising the art of fencing since he was a small boy. He enjoyed using the swords more than making them – a fact he kept well hidden from his father.

*If only I could become an adventurer or a soldier of fortune, he thought wistfully for the thousandth time. Journey around the country, or even abroad. Sail the seven seas, free and unfettered.*

“I hope the ride is good, my son,” said Josiah, rubbing his neck. “I must get back to work now.” He hesitated. “There is no rush. You may take the day at leisure after you have delivered the swords. Timothy and I shall do well enough without you for the day.”

Jasper couldn't suppress a grin of delight. The whole day, to wander

the countryside, without having to return to work in the hot blacksmith's shop. He could imagine he really *was* an adventurer, about to embark on a grand quest. Just for a little while.

"Thank you, Pa," he said quickly, wondering again if his father suspected he wasn't an enthusiastic blacksmith. That the work bored and frustrated him. Why else would his overworked father insist he takes the day at leisure on a task that would probably only take the morning?

But if his father *did* suspect that his only son and heir to his business wasn't as keen on being a blacksmith as he was, he wasn't saying. He never had. And Jasper couldn't tell him. What was the point, anyway, when his destiny was so tightly sewn up? He had been born to be a blacksmith. He couldn't change his fate in life.

He bid farewell to his father and Timothy, who was still hard at work in the opposite corner. His friend waved distractedly, his mind on the task at hand. And then, swords in hand, he mounted the horse and was away at last.

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The day was bright and sunny, not even a single cloud in the sky, as he slowly headed down the one main street of his home village. Shopkeepers called out to him as they swept their front doorsteps, smiling widely. Jasper had known them all his life; they were mostly good people, with only a few exceptions.

His eyes swept over the shops. The cobblers, the bakers, and butcher's shops were all located on the right-hand side of the street. On the left, there was a small bookstore, a haberdashery, and a dressmaker.

Collstock was small – many people chose to go to Shrewsbury, the largest town in Shropshire, to shop. But he and his father rarely did. All that they needed was here.

Suddenly, he saw a young woman stopped on the street, waving to him enthusiastically. She had nut brown hair beneath her white bonnet and a wooden basket perched on her arm. It was Susannah Allen.

He had known her his entire life. The Allens lived next door to the Burnets. Mrs. Allen, Susannah's mother, had provided a feminine influence in their household ever since his own mother had died when he was only ten.

"Jasper!" called Susannah, her eyes bright. "Where are you off to today?"

Jasper pulled the horse to the side of the street but did not dismount. He smiled down at her. "I am headed to Highbury Manor," he said, gesturing to the pile of swords strapped onto the back of the mare's rump. "A special delivery for His Grace."

Susannah nodded. "Will you be back in time for Bible class in the church hall this afternoon?"

Jasper hesitated. Susannah had been trying to rope him into the weekly Bible readings for weeks now. It really wasn't his thing at all. Sitting for two hours pondering and discussing passages from the Bible bored him to tears. But Susannah meant well, he guessed.

“I am afraid not,” he said slowly. “Pa wants me to do a few other errands along the way and afterwards as well.” He gazed at her steadily, trying not to blink, to betray his lie.

Her face fell. “Oh...well, that is a shame.” She bit her lip. “But I shall see you this evening, at least, when I bring the dinner as always.”

“Of course, Susannah,” he smiled, feeling inordinately relieved she hadn’t challenged him about attending the class. “I look forward to it. Monday is shepherd’s pie, and you know I would not miss that for the world. Your mother makes the best in the county.”

Susannah looked pleased. “Well, until then, Jasper. Have a good day.”

He tipped his hat at her, leading the horse on. He felt her gaze follow him as he hit the edge of the village, heading towards the path that led to the woodlands. It was practically burning into his back.

*Susannah likes you, said a small voice in his head. She likes you very much indeed. In that special way.*

Firmly, he ignored the voice. He didn’t want to hear it.

As he cantered along the dirt road, noting the fields of bluebells, he thought of Susannah Allen. She had been making lovesick eyes at him and blushing furiously when she talked to him for over a year now. It was making him just a bit uncomfortable.

He sighed heavily. It wasn't that he didn't like Susannah; he liked her very much indeed. And she was pretty, in a fresh-faced way, with a trim figure. She was only a year younger than himself. He knew that a lot of men of four and twenty would be more than happy to take her as a wife and settle down into a life of domestic contentment.

But the mere thought of it filled him with the strangest terror imaginable.

He sighed again. He just didn't want to settle down and have a family at all. If he married Susannah, or any of the village girls, it would be admitting that his dreams of a different life were lost forever. He would never escape Collstock and go adventuring – he would be the village blacksmith for the term of his natural life.

It was like looking at a gaol sentence.

He gritted his teeth, spurring the horse to go faster, almost to a gallop, revelling in the sensation of the wind in his hair. If only the open road were his life. Riding from place to place, experiencing different places and people. There was a whole world out there that he simply knew nothing about. The desire to experience it burnt so intensely he could barely stand it.

It wasn't that he was ashamed of his humble life. He was very proud of his father and all he had achieved. Pa was the best blacksmith in the county; he had an unrivalled reputation. People travelled for miles out of their way to seek his services. They weren't poor, not by a long stretch. Collstock was a lovely village with fine people – a very stable place to have been born and raised.

But it was all so unbearably dull.



In despair, he pushed the treacherous thoughts out of his mind, riding faster through the woods. The horse's hooves thundered on the dirt ground. It felt strangely cathartic; he had always loved riding. He loved anything physical, where he was moving. It was as if the movement entered his bloodstream, transforming him. The only times he felt truly alive.

He was sweating by the time he slowed the horse down, staring into the distance. There was Highbury Manor, just beyond the hill. No one would ever be able to miss it. It was the grandest house in the district – practically a palace, sprawling over a hundred acres or more. The home of the Duke of Coventry and his family.

A place so far removed from his own modest upbringing it was like comparing day to night.

He gazed at it for a moment longer before leading the horse onwards. He had an errand to complete. And the sooner it was done, the sooner he could leave and take advantage of the rest of this unexpected day off.

## Chapter 2

Lady Isabella Finch restlessly flipped her golden hair over her shoulder, facing her father across the breakfast table. The Duke of Coventry looked unruffled, as always, sipping his specially blended tea from his favourite China set.

“Can we go riding today, at least?” challenged Isabella, her nostrils flaring. “I do not know if I can endure a day indoors. And the weather is so fine.”

The Duke sighed. “I have already told you, Isabella, that I am expecting the blacksmith from Collstock this morning. He is delivering an assortment of swords I have ordered. And I shall be on other business this afternoon.” He paused, gazing at her in a mock stern fashion. “Miss Ellis will be along for your pianoforte lesson, and your Aunt Jemima will be visiting as well. You shall be well occupied for the day.”

Isabella rolled her eyes. Listening to the aged Miss Ellis ramble on about her time on the concert stage when she was a young woman was so unbearably dull. And her Aunt Jemima wasn’t much better. All she ever wanted to do was press flowers into books and embroider. The day stretched before her. Hours and hours of pure boredom.

“Can I come and look at your new swords?” she asked quickly. “I would love to see them...”

“And so you shall, in good time,” said the Duke, frowning slightly. “But I would prefer it if you were not present when the blacksmith arrives. Do not think I have forgotten what you did when the antique

dealer from Burnley delivered those antique swords that time. I have never lived that one down. People still remind me about it, from time to time.”

Isabella sighed dramatically. “It was all in good fun, Papa. You know that it was.”

Her father’s mouth twitched. “Be that as it may, Isabella, it was still a shocking thing for a well brought up lady to do,” he said. “Marching into the room, picking up one of the swords, pinning him to the wall, and challenging the poor man to a duel! He almost keeled over from apoplexy.”

Isabella couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing. She could still see poor Mr. Dunn, ashen-faced, with beads of sweat on his forehead, staring at her in horror. She had placed the sword expertly underneath his chin, pressing against the soft flesh of his neck. His hands had reared up, trying to fend her off. He had looked like an insect pinned to a page.

Her father stared at her for a moment before he joined in. The next second, they were both roaring with laughter. Tea sputtered out of the Duke’s nose. He grabbed his napkin, dabbing it ruefully.

“I have never seen a man leave Highbury Manor so fast,” gasped Isabella, still wheezing. “It was as if the hounds of hell were on his tail.”

The Duke dabbed at his eyes with the napkin. “The unfortunate Mr. Dunn was never the same man again, I think. You would have given him nightmares forevermore.” He paused, sobering a little. “It was a very humorous incident. But something like that cannot happen again,

Isabella. You already have a reputation as a wild child. We cannot worsen it further, and I simply do not trust you to behave.”

“Spoilsport,” sulked Isabella, poking her tongue out at him. “You know that Mr. Dunn was never in the slightest danger. No one can handle a sword as I can.”

“Nevertheless, you must not attend this visit,” said her father, wagging his finger at her. “You must stay well away, Isabella. Do you promise me?”

Isabella sighed dramatically. “I promise...if you promise to show me the swords this evening, before dinner.”

“It is a deal,” said the Duke, standing up abruptly, throwing the napkin on the table. “And now, I must get ready to receive him. He should be here within the hour.” He looked at his daughter. “Perhaps you should go and speak to Nathaniel before Miss Ellis arrives for your lesson. He didn’t eat much this morning and scurried out of the dining room within five minutes.”

“It is only because his latest book just arrived, Papa,” said Isabella in a dry voice. “You know what he is like. He will be curled up in his armchair, avidly devouring it.”

The Duke frowned. “That boy always has his head in a book,” he muttered. “It is not good for him. His eyesight will be ruined entirely by the time he is a young man.” His frown deepened for a moment before his face cleared. “You should still look in on him, Isabella. Make sure he is alright. Promise?”

“Of course, Papa,” said Isabella. It was no hardship to spend time with her younger brother. She loved him dearly, even if he was an insatiable bookworm.

The Duke looked pleased, sweeping out of the room. Isabella stared after him thoughtfully.

He had made her promise not to interrupt his visit with the blacksmith. And she wouldn't. But after she had checked in on Nathaniel, she might spy on them if she had a chance. Papa would be none the wiser. And she had to do *something* to break the infernal boredom of the day ahead, didn't she?

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Nathaniel was in exactly the position she knew he would be when she entered his chambers. The twelve-year-old was curled up in the large, upholstered armchair in the corner of the room, engrossed in his latest book.

Isabella tilted her head sideways, reading the title. *Waverley*, by Sir Walter Scott. She had never heard of it. But then, she wasn't an avid reader in the least. She didn't like sitting around at all.

Her eyes softened as she studied him. He had grown a foot taller in the past six months, his limbs lengthening. His blonde hair had darkened a shade, too, and his voice was breaking. He sometimes spoke with the high cadence of a child and sometimes the low tone of a man. He was highly self-conscious about it, and she knew better than to tease him.

She walked into the room, collapsing onto a chair opposite him. He acknowledged her presence with the raising of one eyebrow, but he didn't lift his eyes away from his book.

"What is that you are reading?" she asked.

Sighing, he put the book down, gazing at her irritably. "It is *Waverley*, by Sir Walter Scott. Surely even *you* can read the title, Isabella."

"Oh, you are the clever one, are you not?" she shot back. "Yes, I can *just* about manage to read the title, thank you very much. What I meant is, what is it about?"

"It is about an Englishman having adventures in Jacobite Scotland," he said, his eyes gleaming. "It is really rather good already, and I have barely started it."

"Sounds fascinating," lied Isabella. She thought it sounded tedious in the extreme. Who wanted to read about someone going through adventures rather than having them yourself?

She decided to change the subject. "The new swords that Papa ordered are arriving this morning," she said, smiling at him. "It is rather exciting."

Nathaniel sighed. "Swords and weapons are all that Papa cares about," he said sourly. "Why must we always go and look at his collection? I cannot abide it."

“Papa has one of the best sword collections in the country,” said Isabella fervently. “And these new ones will be a great addition to it. The blacksmith from Collstock has an impressive reputation. Are you not curious to see them, even a little bit?”

“No,” declared the boy stoutly. “You already know that sister. But if you wish to gaze at them, then please do so. It means that I may read my book in peace.”

Isabella gazed at him sorrowfully. Nathaniel was her beloved little brother, but he was so reserved. He spent far too much time indoors alone. She could barely persuade him to take a ride with her or even a walk around the grounds.

Tears filled her eyes. He hadn’t always been like that. Once, he had been a gregarious little boy, running and laughing. But when their mother had died when he was barely four years old, he had changed. Isabella almost couldn’t bear thinking about how he had howled for her, night after night. She would creep into his room to comfort him, and he would end up falling asleep in her arms.

Books had become his solace and his only joy. He would lose himself within them for hours at a time, barely remembering to eat. Isabella knew that their father worried about him. She did too. But it seemed that nothing could get the boy out of his self-imposed shell.

The family obsession had always been swords. Papa’s collection was amazing, and even Mama, when she had been alive, enjoyed going on expeditions with him to collect more. But it wasn’t just about the collecting of them. Papa loved fencing and was very good at it. She had been sparring with him since she was a girl and loved it more

than anything in this world, as well.

But Nathaniel was different. He had no love of swords and had never expressed an interest in fencing at all. Isabella knew that Papa didn't quite understand his son as much as he loved him. There was a gulf between them that seemingly could not be bridged.

Isabella gazed out the window. It was a beautiful day out there. And Nathaniel was holed up in his room, as always. It was a crying shame.

Suddenly, she lurched forward, grabbing the book out of his hand, dangling it before him.

"Give it back, Isabella," he snapped, his eyes flashing. "I mean it."

"If you want it, come and get it," she cried, flying out of the room.

She heard him behind her in hot pursuit. He wanted that book. She flew down the staircase, past a startled maid carrying a pile of linen and through the servant's quarters. It was like a rabbit warren down here; narrow corridors leading off to small, boxed rooms. Nathaniel was just behind her, breathing down her neck.

She burst through the kitchen, causing Cook to drop her wooden spoon into a cauldron of soup. Then, she was out the back door and into the gardens, flying like the wind.

"You are beastly," cried the boy behind her.



Abruptly, she stopped. He collided into her. They both fell on the lawn, laughing breathlessly. Isabella leaned over, tickling him under the arms. He squirmed with pleasure, his dark eyes gleaming, his cheeks ruddy with the flight.

Slowly, they sat up, recovering their breath. "Now, was that not fun?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "You know that it was."

He scowled at her for a moment before breaking out into a wide grin. "I suppose so," he said reluctantly. "But you must give my book back, Isabella."

"I will," she promised. "But first, we must go for a quick walk. Do you agree?"

He nodded slowly. "Agreed."

They got up, dusting themselves off, walking side by side through the gardens. Isabella linked her arm through his, leaning close. Nathaniel was so very dear to her. Even though he was ten years younger than her and vastly different in temperament and interests, it was as if they were two peas in a pod.

They kept walking, reaching the west side of the grounds, where the stables were. They were just in time to see a man dismount from a horse before taking a pile of swords off the back of the beast.

Isabella's eyes widened. This must be the blacksmith. But he was far younger than she had imagined. Probably only two or so years older than herself. He was tall and wiry, with longish curling brown hair. He didn't notice them gazing at him as he headed towards the house.

"Come on," said Isabella to her brother, not taking her eyes off the man. "Let us return to the house. I shall let you have your book. A promise is a promise, after all."

## Chapter 3

Jasper tried not to let his jaw gape as he was led through the house by the butler. If Highbury Manor was impressive on the outside, it was as nothing compared to the opulence and luxury of the house's interior. He had never seen anything like it in his life.

The rooms were huge, with extraordinarily high ceilings. Chandeliers hung low from ornate cornice roses, the details etched with gold paint. There weren't many pieces of furniture, but it was all large and looked priceless. The floor was white marble, and the windows almost fell to the ground.

He was finally led into a room. He recognised the Duke, sitting behind a mahogany desk. He had seen the man at the blacksmith's shop from time to time over the years, chatting with his father, but he had kept well back and never spoken with him. The Duke of Coventry was a very high-born man, and his father wouldn't have taken kindly to any interruption while he was entertaining such an important client.

The gentleman stood up. Jasper covertly studied him. He was a smallish man, with grey balding hair and sparkling green eyes. The Duke always seemed to have an air of restless energy about him.

"You are not Josiah Burnet," declared the Duke, raising his eyebrows. "You do not look anything like the blacksmith."

Jasper bowed. "No, Your Grace. Josiah is my father. He sends his apologies, but he was unable to make the delivery today due to other work commitments." He paused. "I am delivering the swords to you."

“What is your name?” smiled the Duke, studying him with his darting eyes.

“Jasper Burnet, Your Grace.”

“Well, Jasper, it is very nice to make your acquaintance.” He took a deep breath. “Please, lay the swords down on this table. I am agog to see them and cannot wait another moment.”

Jasper nodded, doing as the Duke asked. Very carefully, he laid the swords out, one by one. They gleamed in the sunlight slanting through the window.

“What beauties,” breathed the Duke, leaning close to inspect them, one by one. “Your father has done an excellent job, Burnet. No one can hold a candle to him, in my opinion.”

Jasper’s chest swelled with pride. “No, indeed, Your Grace. My father is an artisan. People come from miles away to do business with him.”

The Duke straightened. “You work at your father’s blacksmith shop?”

Jasper nodded. “Yes. I have been apprenticed there since I was young.”

“Are you as good a sword maker as your father?” The Duke stared at

him closely.

Jasper grimaced slightly. "I wish I was, Your Grace. I do try very hard. But my father has a natural affinity with the metal. It is as if it speaks to him in some way. I cannot quite explain it..."

"No need," said the Duke firmly. "I know what you mean. Some people *are* just true artisans; they are born to do the work they do. Your father is gifted." He paused. "Do you know much about swords?"

Jasper nodded. "Yes. I might not make them as finely as my father, but I am very familiar with them. I love them. I have a modest collection..." He trailed off, embarrassed. He was talking too much about himself. But the Duke didn't seem concerned by this. If anything, he looked intrigued.

"Would you like to see my collection?" he asked suddenly, his eyes gleaming. "I have amassed quite a lot over the years. Not just swords, but other weapons as well. Have I piqued your interest?"

Jasper nodded again, feeling a frisson of excitement. "Oh yes, Your Grace. I would love to see it."

"Come along then," he said, walking briskly out of the room. "I have a special place where I keep it all..."

Jasper trailed the old duke through the house, down hallways, and up staircases. The Duke walked at such a dizzying pace he had to run at some points to keep up with him. Eventually, he stopped, selecting a door and standing back as he pushed it open.

Jasper gasped. It was a large room with wooden cabinets lining the walls. Those cabinets were filled with swords and daggers. So many that it literally took his breath away.

“Go on,” said the Duke, smiling proudly. “Go and have a wander. I shall show you some very special pieces once you have browsed.”

Jasper didn't need to be asked a second time. He entered the room, slowly walking along, his mouth dropping open as he gazed at the cabinets.

He had never seen anything like it in his life. This whole collection would be worth more coin than he would ever see in his lifetime.

“It is amazing,” he whispered, his heart beating faster.

“It is, is it not?” beamed the Duke, coming up behind him. He pointed at a dagger. “You see that one there? It is one of my most precious finds. An original dagger from Sparta. I had to keep haggling to get a good price for it. I found it in a military store down a back street in Soho, many moons ago.”

Jasper stared at the dagger. He didn't know where Sparta was or when the dagger originated from. But it looked old, and the engraving on the handle was unfamiliar. It was obviously very precious indeed. He was itching to examine it.

“Go on,” said the Duke, nodding towards it. “Have a close look. The workmanship is impeccable. They do not make daggers like that anymore.”

Jasper reached over, picking it up and examining it closely. He ran the blade down the palm of his hand. It was as sharper than he expected. He turned it over in his hand, looking at the handle. It was meticulously fashioned; intricately carved in a material he did not recognise.

“It is mother of pearl,” said the Duke. “A most unique design. And hundreds of years old.”

“It looks almost as if it might have been made yesterday,” breathed Jasper. “As if it is hot off the anvil.”

“Indeed,” said the Duke, nodding with satisfaction. “The quality is first-rate. One knows something is superior if it has stood the test of time so marvellously.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” said Jasper, carefully placing the dagger back where it sat. “I shall tell my father about this. About the Spartan dagger, which has travelled through time to belong to you. He shall be spellbound.”

The Duke looked at him thoughtfully. “You are an intriguing young man, Jasper Burnet.” He paused. “Would you fancy a spar while you are here? I would enjoy seeing your fencing skills.”

Jasper stared at him in amazement. He hadn’t expected that. The

Duke looked at him expectantly, his green eyes alight.

“Of course, Your Grace,” he said slowly. “I would be honoured.”

What else could he say? The gentleman *was* a duke, after all. He could hardly refuse him. And besides, he enjoyed fencing immensely. This day was proceeding much better than he had ever expected.

They selected their swords, facing each other, in the centre of the large room. Jasper suddenly realised that the room had been designed for this purpose. The cabinets housing the weapon collection were deliberately pushed back against the walls, allowing space for fencing in the majority of the room, which was not furnished at all.

The Duke didn't waste any time. Skilfully, he lunged. Jasper reared back, raising his own sword, blocking the move. They parried for several minutes, back and forth. Jasper realised the Duke hadn't exaggerated – he was good. It took all his skill to fend the gentleman off and look for angles to gain the advantage over him.

He felt his competitive nature rise to the fore as they sparred, moving back and forth, across the marble floor. He wanted to win and could see a few ways that he could. But eventually, he deliberately let the Duke hoist the sword out of his hand so that it clattered to the floor.

The Duke's eyes were glittering fiercely, and he was panting. He looked exhilarated.

“Well done,” he said, patting Jasper on the back. “You are a worthy opponent indeed, young man! Are you self-taught?”



Jasper nodded, catching his own breath. "I have taken opportunities to practise with many people over the years. I have learnt tactics from all of them, but I have never had a formal teacher."

"Even more impressive," said the Duke, gazing at him pensively. "It shows that you have a natural aptitude for it." He hesitated. "A thought has just come to me. Would you be willing to put your skills to good use and teach my son to fence? I would pay you well."

Jasper smothered his surprise. He hadn't expected that.

"Has your son any skills in fencing?" he asked slowly, to buy time.

The Duke looked a little sad. He slowly shook his head. "No. He has not expressed any interest in the sport nor my collection. He is rather...bookish." He took a deep breath. "I have let him indulge it, but I think now is the time to shake things up a little. It would be good for him...I think *you* would be good for him, Jasper Burnet."

Jasper hesitated for a moment. It would mean taking time away from the shop regularly. Could his father spare him? Or want to?

But then, he thought of Timothy. His good friend was there to help. And if he was being brutally honest with himself, Timothy showed more promise as a skilled blacksmith than he did. Further, Timothy would jump at the chance to do more work. He truly loved the trade.

And Jasper himself would love the chance to do something different, away from the shop. He loved fencing, and the Duke was willing to pay him well. It was not quite the grand adventure he had been dreaming about, but it would pass the time very well indeed.

He nodded slowly. "I would be honoured, Your Grace."

A wide grin broke out over the Duke's face. He held out his hand. Jasper took it. They shook.

"Oh, that is very good," said the Duke, his grin widening further. "Very good indeed! What about next Wednesday, for the first lesson? You can come at the same time as today. The lessons will be in this room, although you may take him into the grounds at your discretion, as well."

Jasper nodded. "That sounds perfect, Your Grace."

The man clapped him hard on the back in delight. They placed the swords back and turned to walk out of the room.

Jasper saw a flash of movement when they were nearly to the door from a small room adjacent to it. He turned, gazing curiously in the direction of the movement. He could just see a figure, pressed behind the door, but he couldn't make out any details of them. It looked like he and the Duke were being watched.

Jasper hesitated. The Duke didn't say anything about it. Perhaps he hadn't seen. It was of no consequence, at any rate. What did it matter if someone in the household had been watching their exchange? It

was probably just a curious servant.

When he was on his horse, about to leave Highbury Manor, he idly gazed up at the house. And then stared hard. There was a pale face in a window in an upstairs room, looking straight at him. Jasper saw a flash of long, golden hair before the figure hastily dropped the curtain.

*Curious*, he thought, leading the horse down the driveway.

But as soon as he got to the road and let the horse into a gallop, losing himself in the exhilaration of the ride, he promptly forgot all about it.

## Chapter 4

Jasper sat down at the kitchen table, pouring tea from the large pot into a cup. His father was already seated, almost shovelling the food into his mouth, as was his wont. Josiah Burnet thought that food was just fuel to keep one going from day to day. Jasper could see he was half in the workshop already in his mind.

His father glanced up at him. “Are you setting off to Highbury Manor as soon as you are done here?”

Jasper nodded. “Yes, if that is alright with you, Pa. It’s the first lesson with the lad and I thought it would be good to get there early to look over the swords we will use. You do not need me for anything pressing in the shop before I go?”

His father shook his head, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “No, Timothy and I have it all under control. He is a good lad, isn’t he? Hardworking and dedicated. I am glad I took your suggestion to apprentice him.”

Jasper nodded again. “Timothy is dedicated, Pa. He will make a great blacksmith.”

His father sighed heavily. “I am getting older, Jasper. Everything aches. I may have to pass on the shop to you sooner rather than later.”

Jasper felt alarmed. He didn’t want to hear this in any way. Not that his father was getting older and thinking of retiring, nor that the

responsibility of the shop would one day become his.

“You are still as fit as a fiddle, Pa,” he declared stoutly. “That day is a long way off yet.”

His father looked at him steadily but did not say a word. There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment. His father was the one who eventually broke it.

“I am very proud that you are in service to the Duke, Jasper,” he said slowly. “It is a very good opportunity for you. I know how much you enjoy fencing, my son. And the extra coin from the lessons will come in handy.” He stood up. “Tell the Duke that the new swords he requested will be ready next week, will you? I am so glad he liked the ones you delivered so much.”

“I will, Pa,” he replied, smiling at his father. “And thank you for giving me the time off to do this. I do appreciate it.”

His father put a hand on his right shoulder, squeezing gently. “That is what we do, my son. You should have time for your own life as well.” He hesitated. “The workshop is my whole world, and sometimes I forget that it is not necessarily the same for you. That you have your own interests.”

Jasper nodded, feeling a painful lump form in his throat. His father was the best in the world; no man could ask for any better. He was wise, considerate and generous. It had only been the two of them for so long, since his mother had died. And it was the most natural thing in the world for a son to take over his father’s business. He had a duty to him and to the shop.

*Even if it meant letting go of my own dreams.*

“Well, I am away to work,” said the older man gruffly, squeezing his shoulder again. “I hope you have a good lesson with the lad. I shall see you when you get back.”

His father abruptly turned, walking out of the kitchen. Jasper heard the bang of the back door.

He drained his teacup, standing up. He was strangely nervous, as well as excited – he didn’t have an appetite at all. He would probably rue not eating later, but it would stick in his throat now.

This might be the start of something entirely new for him.

He strode out of the house, saddling the horse, his stomach-churning. He didn’t know why he was so anxious about going back to Highbury Manor today. All he had to do was teach a lad how to fence. It wasn’t so very hard, was it?

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The Duke was waiting for him in the room. He smiled broadly, clapping him on the back.

“Jasper! Welcome! How have you been?”

“Very good, I thank you, Your Grace,” Jasper replied, gazing around the room. “Your son will be joining us soon?”

“Yes, he is on his way,” said the Duke, his smile widening. “You may have to coax him a little, Jasper. He is a rather reluctant pupil. But I have faith in your abilities!”

Jasper smiled nervously. He might be a good fencer, having always indulged in his love of swordplay, but he had never been a teacher. How was he going to inspire the lad to practise, if he was so against the idea?

Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

“I do apologise that I cannot be here for it,” continued the Duke. “I have an appointment with my solicitor in Shrewsbury and must leave soon. Damn shame. I was hoping to be here and have a little spar as well, but that is life.” He paused. “Do you need anything before I go?”

Jasper slowly shook his head, glancing at the door. He had been hoping that the lad would already be here, and the Duke could introduce them, perhaps reassure his son. But it seemed it wasn’t to be. He took a deep breath.

“Can I pick the swords we will use?” he asked.

“Of course,” said the Duke, clapping him on the back again. “I shall

leave it all up to you.” He pointed to a table in a far corner. “I have had the servants bring in the fencing masks and paraphernalia. I think it should all fit.”

Jasper nodded. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Very good,” said the gentleman, nodding vigorously. “Well, I shall be away then.” He winked. “Good luck!”

Jasper smiled nervously. The Duke walked out, leaving him alone in the room. He realised too late that he hadn’t told the Duke that the other swords he had ordered would be ready next week.

He paced the room, wondering where the lad was. What if he just didn’t show up? The Duke was leaving the manor. What would he do then? Simply pace the room for the allotted time and then leave, slinking away with his tail between his legs?

There was a noise from the doorway. He spun around, his heart racing. A slight figure stood in the doorway, dressed in full fencing regalia, from head to toe. The mask was already in place. He couldn’t see the lad’s face at all.

He studied the figure. The lad was taller than he had pictured; he was obviously older than he thought he would be. He hadn’t thought to ask the Duke how old his son actually was. When the gentleman had said his son had no skills, he had assumed he was a child. But the figure in front of him was fully grown.

“Nathaniel?” he asked slowly, remembering his name.



The figure didn't reply. He simply strode into the room, facing him. Jasper took a deep breath. The Duke had said his son was reserved. Perhaps attempting to talk straight away was not the way to go. Perhaps they should simply jump into it.

He walked over to a cabinet, taking out two fencing swords. He turned, handing one to the lad. He was just about to explain the position he should take when the boy raised the sword, standing in position, ready to spar.

Jasper's eyes widened. He raised his own sword. The boy lunged forward. There was the clinking of metal as the swords met. The boy darted around him, parrying confidently. Jasper was so astonished he almost dropped his own sword before recovering.

They sparred back and forth for a few moments. Jasper reacted instinctively but couldn't work out what was going on in the least. The Duke had been adamant that the boy didn't have many skills, and yet, he was leaping around like an experienced swordsman, assuredly sparring.

The lad was giving him a very good fight, indeed. This boy did not need teaching at all. What on earth was going on here?

Suddenly, he noticed that the fencing mask had slipped a little – one golden curl escaped it, bouncing energetically as the boy moved. It was quite a long lock of hair. He straightened abruptly, confused. That did not look like boy's hair at all.

His opponent took advantage of his distraction, expertly lunging, dislodging his own sword out of his hand. It clattered to the marble floor.

The boy laughed. A high-pitched, breathless laugh. And then, he reefed off the fencing mask, staring at Jasper.

Jasper gasped. This was no boy. He was staring into the extremely pretty face of a young lady with cat-like green eyes and ruby red lips. Her golden curls spilled out, surrounding her face, escaping a bun on the top of her head.

She mock bowed. "That was a good fight! You are as skilled as Papa said you were." She walked towards him briskly, smiling brightly. "I am Lady Isabella Finch, by the way. The daughter of the Duke."

He was so gobsmacked he couldn't speak for a moment. "I...I do not understand," he stammered eventually. "I thought you were the Duke's son..."

The young lady laughed, tilting her head back. It peeled around the room.

"I hope I do not have the figure of a twelve-year-old boy," she said tartly, her green eyes sparkling. "Are you saying I do?"

His jaw dropped. She was standing before him, her head tilted to the side, with one hand on her hip, gazing at him coquettishly.

He couldn't help it. His eyes swept over her. She was clearly not a boy. Now that he was looking properly, he saw the slight swell of her breasts, the small nipped-in waist, and her feminine hips.

He coloured, not knowing what to say at all. Of all the things he had expected might happen in this room, this had never occurred to him. The Duke had a daughter, as well as a son. A very pretty daughter, who had obviously decided to have some fun at his expense.

"You look like you could catch flies with that open mouth," she laughed. "It is quite alright! I just thought we should be introduced before your lesson with my brother, that is all. I have completely shocked you, haven't I?"

He nodded dumbly, embarrassed. He knew his face was the colour of beetroot.

At that moment, an unsmiling boy walked into the room. He had light brown hair and long, gangly limbs.

"This is Nathaniel," said the young lady, smiling brightly. "My brother."

The boy gazed at Jasper. He looked sullen.

"Well, I shall leave you to it!" said the young lady, smiling widely. "I am expecting a visitor within the half-hour and must change." She squeezed her brother's arm as she passed by him. "Have fun, dearest."

And then she was gone.

Jasper gaped after her. “That was your sister?”

The boy nodded slowly. “Yes. There is no one like Isabella. It was *her* idea, not mine, to trick you to start with.”

Jasper took a deep breath. He didn’t know whether to be annoyed or charmed by the trick. He had never met a high-born young lady before. He hadn’t realised they could be so playful and high-spirited. He had always imagined they would be proper and prim.

He tore his eyes away from the door, turning back to the lad. He still had a lesson to accomplish. But he simply could not shake the thought of her at all. Lady Isabella Finch was quite a swordswoman, indeed. He had never met a woman who could wield a sword like that.

Or one that was quite as lovely.

## Chapter 5

Isabella cursed underneath her breath as her maid, Pauline, helped her into her gown. She was running late for her best friend Emily's visit. She could already hear the carriage rattling up the driveway.

"Your hair, My Lady," cried Pauline in dismay. "It is tumbling down..."

"No matter," said Isabella, grabbing a few hairpins and hastily sticking them into her hair. "It is only Emily, after all! She shall not care what I look like, Pauline. Do not be so shocked."

The maid bit her lip. "If you say so..."

Isabella was already rushing through the chamber door, rattling down the staircase. The front door was already opening by the time she got to the foyer. With a cry of delight, she rushed forward, taking her friend's hands.

"Isabella," cried Emily, looking askance. "Have you only just arisen?"

Isabella laughed gaily, taking her friend's arm and leading her towards the parlour. "Not at all. I have actually had a bit of an adventure this morning. I will tell you all about it over tea, shall I, my dear?"

The two young ladies settled in the parlour. Isabella poured the tea, handing a cup to her friend. She could tell that Emily was bursting with curiosity, but her dear friend's natural reserve always ruled her. Emily would wait until Isabella was ready to share.

She cast an eye over her best friend, who she had known forever. Lady Emily Lymington was dressed as always in a high collared demure muslin gown with no adornment. Isabella often thought that Emily had the taste of a nun when it came to fashion. It mirrored her nature. Emily was cautious, reserved, and always thought before she spoke or acted.

The very opposite to herself.

Isabella had often idly wondered why they were such great friends and always had been. They were as different as chalk and cheese. But somehow, the friendship worked. Emily balanced her own high spirits, and she, in turn, enlivened her friend.

Emily sipped her tea, gazing at her friend. "You are looking quite like the cat that got into the cream bowl, Isabella. What *have* you been up to?"

Isabella's eyes sparkled. "Well...did I tell you that Papa has arranged fencing lessons for Nathaniel with the Collstock blacksmith's son?"

Emily gave her a blank look. "Oh yes, you did mention it at the garden party last week! I had quite forgotten." She put down her cup. "What about it?"

Isabella smiled wickedly. "I played a trick on him," she whispered. "It is Nathaniel's first lesson today. I put on my fencing costume and pretended to be him before he was introduced to the man." She choked back her laughter. "He was so shocked, Emily! Papa told him that Nathaniel has no fencing skills, and so I just launched into it, challenging him to a fight. It was quite thrilling."

Emily's mouth dropped open. "Isabella, no! How could you?"

"Quite easily," said Isabella, her smile widening. "He was so confused but rose to the occasion. It was a good fight." She paused, thinking about the handsome young man, with longish brown hair and velvet brown eyes. "And then I just took off my mask to see his reaction. His jaw almost hit the ground."

Emily had been sipping her tea. At her friend's words, she spluttered, gazing at her with an appalled look on her face.

"Please tell me you did not do that, Isabella," she whispered, her eyes wide. "To have played such a trick is terrible, but to then reveal your identity...!" She shook her head in horror. "He will be talking about it to everyone in that village. You should have thought of your reputation."

Isabella sighed irritably, pushing a curl behind one ear. "There was no damage done, Emily. It was just a harmless trick. I did not *kiss* him or anything!"

Emily's face reddened. "I should hope not! But you were still alone

with a young man, Isabella. There was no chaperone. It is not the done thing at all.”

Isabella sighed again. “How can you say that? He has been hired by my father to teach my brother fencing. It is the same as being with any tutor. It is not as if I was alone with a *gentleman*. He is the blacksmith’s son.”

Emily pursed her lips disapprovingly. “It makes no difference. He is a young man, and you were alone with him, regardless of if he is a gentleman or not.” She shook her head sorrowfully. “Truly, Isabella, you do let your high spirits run away with you.”

Isabella mutinously gazed off into space. Emily could be such a stick in the mud. She had thought that her friend might find the trick as funny as she did. And she had never even thought about the fact she was alone with the man before her brother came into the room. It hadn’t even entered her mind.

She rolled her eyes. It was so tediously dreary being a young lady. There were so many petty rules and regulations, which she simply could not keep up with. How she wished she had been born a boy. Maybe then her father would have let her go abroad by herself to have adventures as young gentlemen often did, and she would not be stuck in this house bored out of her mind.

Instead, she was imprisoned at Highbury Manor, wilting on the vine like a hothouse flower. She wasn’t even allowed to play a harmless trick without shocking everyone.

“I am sorry,” blurted Emily, reaching out and patting her hand. “I suppose it is not that bad. You just shocked me, that was all. I was not



expecting you to say such a thing.”

Isabella turned back to her friend, her eye’s softening. Emily always tried so very hard to understand her antics. She knew that her friend was indeed truly shocked. Emily would never have thought to do such a thing – ever. She always followed the rules and seemed genuinely bewildered that anybody else might not.

Gazing into her friend’s kind face now, she was tempted to confide that she almost wished the blacksmith’s son *had* kissed her. Jasper Burnet was an extremely handsome young man. She had been struck by his dark good looks the moment she had laid eyes upon him when he had arrived at Highbury Manor a week ago, to deliver the swords to her father.

She hadn’t been able to resist after that, of course. She had sent Nathaniel back to his room with his book and eavesdropped at her father’s study door. When she had heard that they were going to go to the Sword Room, as they called it, so that her father could show off his magnificent collection, she had hastily hightailed it to the room adjacent so that she could spy upon them further.

Her father had shown the young man the collection, even handing him his precious Spartan dagger to inspect. That action alone showed Isabella that Papa liked the man – he didn’t allow just anyone to handle the object. And she had seen the reverence on the young man’s face as he slowly gazed upon it, turning it around in his hands. This man loved weapons as much as she and her father did.

And then, Papa had challenged him to a fight. Isabella had been surprised but pleased to see how expertly the young man handled a sword. And she was almost certain that he had let her father win. Papa had known it, as well.

When her father asked him to tutor Nathaniel in fencing, she had felt a warm glow all over. She had waited with bated breath for his response. She wanted him to return to Highbury Manor. She wanted to see him again. And when he had said yes, and they had agreed on a day and time, she had almost cheered, giving away her hiding spot.

He had stared at the doorway where she was hiding, as if he suspected someone was there, on his way out. It had taken all her effort to stifle her giggles. And once he was gone, she couldn't stop herself running up the staircase to her room to look out the window upon him again, only just dropping the curtain in time when he looked up.

That night, at dinner, she had asked Papa his name, feigning innocence of the whole scheme. Her father had told them he was Jasper Burnet, son of the famous Collstock blacksmith, and that he had asked him to teach fencing to Nathaniel starting the following week.

Nathaniel had not been pleased, of course, looking sullen throughout the dinner, and had escaped without a word as soon as he was done to bury his head in his book again. Isabella had been a little scared that Papa might give into him and cancel the lessons. But the Duke had been quietly adamant. Nathaniel *would* learn to fence. The boy needed exercise and routine. All Nathaniel's entreaties over the next week to not do it had fallen on deaf ears.

It had only been this morning she had come up with her plan to trick him that she was her brother. She didn't know where it had come from, only that she wanted to see the blacksmith's son up close. She wanted to engage with him before Nathaniel's lesson. And it was a pretty good trick, as well. A laugh to break the monotony of the day if nothing else.

It had been exhilarating fighting with him. He *was* good – if it hadn't been for that moment he had become distracted, he might have even won. And he was even better looking up close. He had smooth olive skin and white teeth. His velvet brown eyes were so dark they were almost black. She had never felt so entranced by a young man before.

Isabella sighed heavily. Of course, she couldn't tell Emily that. Her friend was shocked as it was. If she said she found the blacksmith's son so very attractive, Emily would be scandalised. It wasn't as if he was a gentleman, after all. According to the rules, one wasn't supposed to look upon the lower classes in such a way.

She felt her cheeks turning pink. Young gentlemen at balls and parties had never much interested her. They were all so bland and boring. She knew she was an oddity amongst the young ladies. They were all clamouring for suitors and a proposal.

Emily was no different, simpering and giggling over this young gentleman or that one. Her friend was always surprised by the fact Isabella simply wasn't concerned with them. It was supposed to be the only thing a young lady of two and twenty should be concerned with.

"You are only looking out for me, dearest," said Isabella now, patting her friend's arm kindly. "I know I can be reckless. You are always the calm breeze in my sails. I do appreciate it, you know."

Emily smiled tentatively. "I know I seem boring to you, Isabella. I just do not want you to get a reputation as wayward. Not many gentlemen would consider you, even if you are the daughter of a duke if they think you are wild. They all want a proper, decorous lady for a wife, you know."

Isabella's smile froze on her face. How insufferably dull. If she *did* marry any of those gentlemen, she would simply be swapping one prison for another, she was sure of it. None of them would let her be herself. At least at Highbury Manor, her father genuinely loved her high spirits, often joining in. She knew many people, like her Aunt Jemima, thought he overindulged and spoilt his only daughter, but they were so very close.

"I am sure they do, Emily," she said slowly to her friend, silently vowing never to marry such a man. "I am sure they do."

## Chapter 6

Dusk was settling over the sky, turning it a lovely shade of lilac streaked with orange by the time Jasper finally dismounted his horse at the back of the house in Collstock. He saw the shimmering light from a lantern burning in the shop.

Sighing with weariness, he made his way there, expecting to see his father bent over the anvil. But there was no sign of his father at all. Instead, it was Timothy, a look of furious concentration on his face as he sharpened the blade of a sword.

He stared at his friend. Timothy was the same age as he was but looked much younger. It could almost have been a youth he was beholding. Timothy's face was as smooth as an egg, without a skerrick of a whisker in sight. He looked like a choir boy from church – albeit a grubbier one, with the day's toil on his skin and clothes.

“Timothy,” he called to alert his friend of his presence.

Timothy swung around, almost dropping the sword. The lines of weariness were instantly erased, replaced by a wide, open smile.

“There you are, Jasper,” said his friend. “You are very late. Your father has already retired for the night. He said his hands were aching badly with the rheumatism.”

Jasper felt a stab of guilt. His father had been retiring earlier lately because of this. He had been wanting to ignore the fact that the older

man was getting weary of his work, but it was there, as plain as day. And Josiah Burnet had told him outright this morning, as well, that it might be sooner rather than later when he retired for good.

“Did he eat, at least?” he asked, walking to the anvil and picking up the sword Timothy had been working on. “This is good, Timothy.”

Timothy’s smile widened. “Thank you. Your pa trusted me with it, and I have tried hard. I have been working on it all afternoon.” He paused. “To answer your question, I think he had some bread and cheese. How was your day?”

Jasper hesitated. How had his day been? He was still trying to work that out himself.

“Odd,” he said eventually, frowning slightly. “I arrived for the lesson at Highbury Manor. The Duke greeted me, then left.” He paused, thinking of what happened next. “I thought that his son arrived for the lesson. He was dressed in full regalia, and I could not see his face. We fought, and he was good, which confused me, as the Duke had told me he had no skills...”

“Get to the point, Jasper,” said Timothy, rolling his eyes. “I do not want to be here all night.”

Jasper laughed. “Sorry. Well, it turned out that the person I had been sparring with was not the Duke’s son at all. It was his daughter. She took off her mask and revealed herself after she beat me.”

Timothy looked gobsmacked. “The Duke’s *daughter*? She was playing a

trick on you?"

Jasper nodded, thinking again of Lady Isabella Finch, panting from the fight, her green eyes glittering and her golden hair spilling down. He felt a quick surge of desire. He had been having them all day, on and off, when he had thought about her.

Timothy burst out laughing, gripping his sides. Jasper smiled weakly, but then, the absurdity of the situation hit him as well, and he joined in.

"The audacity of her," gasped Timothy, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. "She obviously is high-spirited! What did you say when you realised?"

Jasper shrugged helplessly. "What *could* I say? I fear I made a complete fool of myself. I just gaped like a fish. And then, my real pupil walked in, and she breezed off as if it had been the most natural thing in the world for a high-born lady to play a trick on her brother's fencing teacher."

"That is the most amusing thing I have heard all day," said Timothy, laughing again.

"Do you know anything about her?" asked Jasper slowly. "Her name is Lady Isabella. Have you heard anything of her?"

Timothy slowly shook his head. "No, I have not. I do not think she frequents Collstock. She probably goes to Shrewsbury for shopping, as most of the higher-class ladies do." He gazed at Jasper curiously.

“How old is she?”

Jasper shrugged again. “She appears to be in her early twenties. Much older than her brother, who is only twelve.” He paused. “She is very lovely, Timothy, and a great swordswoman. She beat me. I have never met a woman like her before.”

Timothy grinned. “You sound smitten, my friend. But alas, you can only admire her from afar. She is the daughter of a duke. Very far above you, in every way.”

Jasper felt a stab of sorrow. Timothy was absolutely right, of course. He had no chance in this world of ever pursuing the delectable Lady Isabella. The very thought was ludicrous. The daughters of dukes did not associate with the sons of blacksmiths, let alone entertain one as a suitor. They were as far away from each other as the moon from the earth.

“What was the Duke’s son like?” asked Timothy.

“He was very reserved,” said Jasper, frowning. “He barely spoke to me, and he had no enthusiasm for the lesson at all. When it was over, he politely thanked me then walked off.” He paused. “It is going to be a challenge to teach him well. But I shall try.”

They were interrupted at that moment by the arrival of Susannah, carrying a woven basket over one arm. Delicious smells emanated from it. She was smiling.

“There you both are,” she scolded good-naturedly. “I have brought



dinner. Freshen up, and we shall all sit down at the table and eat before it gets cold.”

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They all settled down at the table after Susannah spread out the meal. Mrs. Allen had made one of her famous rabbit casseroles. There was freshly baked bread to mop up the sauce, and she had even included a bottle of homemade cider to wash it all down with.

Susannah fussed over them like a mother hen, making sure they had everything they needed before she sat down as well.

“You should eat, Susannah,” said Timothy between mouthfuls.

She waved a hand in the air. “I have already dined with Ma.” She paused. “But I shall have a glass of cider with you while you eat.” She poured the glasses, handing them out before turning to Jasper. “How was the lesson at Highbury Manor?”

He nodded, unable to speak for a moment as his mouth was full. He was hungrier than he thought he was. “It was interesting,” he said eventually. “It shall take some time to engage with the lad. He is very reserved and has no interest in fencing.”

“What is his name?” asked Susannah, staring at him keenly.

“Lord Nathaniel,” replied Jasper. “He is twelve-years-old and at that

awkward stage. As if his body is growing faster than he can keep up with.” He paused, taking a long drink of cider. “I met the Duke’s daughter, as well. Her name is Lady Isabella. Have you heard of her at all?”

Susannah raised her eyebrows. “Lady Isabella? Have you *not* heard of her, then?”

Mystified, Jasper shook his head, as did Timothy.

Susannah pursed her lips. “Lady Isabella is well known as wayward. She acts like a boy, tearing around the countryside on her horse.” She paused. “Ma told me she heard that she played a prank on an antique dealer who came to Highbury Manor, bailing the man against a wall with a sword. He thought she was going to slice him in two.”

The men burst out laughing. Susannah didn’t join them in it. She looked disapproving. Obviously, she disagreed with a young lady acting in such a manner. But then, Jasper thought Susannah was probably not unusual to believe so. It *was* a little shocking that a high-born lady tore around the countryside with little decorum, playing tricks on people.

He stared down at his plate pensively. So, the trick Lady Isabella had played on him today was perfectly in character. She was a wayward lady. He had never known that they existed, but then, he didn’t know any high-born ladies, did he? Perhaps they all had a slightly wild side beneath their prim and proper facades.

He smiled slowly. But somehow, he didn’t think so. Lady Isabella was a rare one. And she excited him more than he could fathom. Even now, he was stirring to life beneath the table just thinking about her.

It was a little embarrassing when people were sitting so close beside him.

“What were your impressions of the lady, Jasper?” asked Susannah slowly, staring at him strangely. It was almost as if she was aware of what he was thinking.

He coloured, hastily taking a long drink of cider. “She seems perfectly nice.” For some reason, he didn’t want to mention the trick the lady had played upon him.

“I think she is wayward because she lost her mother at a young age,” said Susannah, nodding her head sagely. “Her primary feminine influence gone and living with a household of men. It is bound to rub off, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps,” said Timothy, polishing off the last of his stew. “It would be awful, losing a mother, even if you live in a fine house and have no cares in the world.”

Jasper nodded. He knew what it was like losing a mother young. The gap could never be filled, no matter how hard people tried. Even now, he yearned for his mother sometimes, wondering what she would be like if she had lived. How different his father would be if he had not lost the love of his life. And how different he would be as well.

The fact that the Finch children had gone through the same thing was like a bond between them, and it explained a lot. Perhaps the young Lord Nathaniel was so reserved because of his loss. He would have been very young indeed when his mother had passed away if Lady Isabella had been young as well. There was a large age gap between the siblings.

Jasper was suddenly conscious of Susannah's eyes upon him again, staring at him in that curious way. He sighed. She tried to hide it, but it was as obvious as the nose on her face that she liked him in that special way. The way she doted upon him, always insisting she was the one to bring over dinner instead of her mother, making excuses to be with him at other times, and inviting him to all the local events.

Susannah would never be so forward as to say anything. She was a modest, well brought up girl, even if she was not a lady. But it was there and he didn't know what to do about it at all. Susannah would never be anything but a good friend, almost a sister, to him. He had never thought of her in that way at all.

He sighed again. He didn't want to break her heart. He wanted her to be happy, to find a young man who loved her and would give her the life she deserved. But that man wasn't him and never would be.

His heart leapt as the thought of the wayward and wild Lady Isabella reared into his mind again. If only she were in his class. But it was like a child crying for the moon. He could never hope to have such a lady. He must push the thought of her out of his mind entirely and just do the job that the Duke was paying him for. He doubted he would see much of her from now on, anyway.

## Chapter 7

From the garden seat, Isabella saw him arriving at Highbury Manor before Emily did. The blacksmith's son, atop his horse, ready for his next lesson with Nathaniel. Jasper Burnet. She knew he would follow the path at the back of the house, towards the servant's entrance. Her heart was starting to beat wildly.

She stood up quickly. "Let us take a stroll, dearest."

Emily raised her eyebrows but stood up as well. Isabella linked arms with her friend, almost dragging her through the gardens towards the path. She knew he would be walking around the corner at any moment.

And suddenly, there he was. His longish brown hair was hastily tied back, giving him the look of a swarthy highwayman. She had forgotten how dark his eyes were. They almost burnt as fiercely as coal. She flushed, feeling the colour rise up like a fever over her body.

He looked shocked to be confronted by them. Hastily, he bowed.

"Ladies," he said in a nervous voice.

Isabella took a deep breath. "Mr. Burnet, may I introduce my dearest friend in the world, Lady Emily Lymington." She turned to her friend. "Emily, this is Mr. Jasper Burnet, who is teaching Nathaniel fencing."

Emily raised her eyebrows. She didn't look impressed by the tall, dark young man in front of her.

"A pleasure, Mr. Burnet," she said in her primmest voice. "Isabella has told me about you." She paused. "She has also told me about the trick she played upon you last week. I do hope that you have not told anyone about it. My dear friend can be a little thoughtless, and I would hate for her reputation to be compromised."

Isabella gasped, glaring at Emily. How could she?

But Jasper Burnet was smiling. "Do not fear, My Lady. I do not hold with gossip. Lady Isabella's trick is safe with me." He hesitated. "I did tell my best friend, but he does not wag his tongue, so you both do not need to worry."

Emily shook her head grimly. "Nevertheless. You have told someone, even if you trust that person." She turned alarmed eyes to Isabella. "How could you have been so reckless?"

Isabella burst out laughing. "It was only a harmless prank, Emily! You do carry on so!" She turned to Jasper Burnet, staring at him in a challenging way. "You are not offended, are you, Mr. Burnet? You realise I was just having some fun?"

His dark eyes sparkled. He was gazing at her in a way that she had never quite seen before. There was definitely admiration, but there was something else, as well. It made her heart flip over in her chest like a pancake.

But before he could respond, her father was walking quickly towards them, trailed by a sullen-looking Nathaniel. Papa was beaming wildly.

“Mr. Burnet! There you are!” he cried. “I thought today’s lesson could happen in the gardens since it is such a glorious day. A servant is bringing the swords out now.” His smile widened, turning to the two young ladies. “Let us settle ourselves and watch, shall we, ladies? It should be a good show!”

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An hour later, Jasper placed down his sword, indicating to Nathaniel that the lesson was over. The boy looked so relieved he had to suppress a wry smile. The second lesson had been as hard going as the first, made worse because they had an audience watching on. The Duke himself and two young ladies.

“Bravo!” the Duke called, clapping enthusiastically. “Oh, well done, Nathaniel! You are coming along marvellously!”

The boy smiled weakly. Jasper felt a bit sorry for him. Obviously, he did not care about fencing at all and was embarrassed that his father was making a show about his supposed development.

“Can I go now?” he asked in a pained voice.

The Duke’s face fell. “I was hoping we might have a bit of a spar,” he said slowly. “But if you prefer to return to your book, Nathaniel, then you may.”

Jasper watched as the boy stared at his father. Then Nathaniel walked over to the two swords laying on the ground, picking up both. He handed one to the Duke.

“Do not expect too much from me,” he said.

The Duke’s face lit up. Then, Lady Isabella jumped to her feet, declaring that the three of them could fight. She would share Nathaniel’s sword. They would take turns. The boy looked with such gratitude at his sister that Jasper felt tears spring to his eyes.

He stood to the side, watching as the three of them playfully sparred together. Neither the Duke nor Lady Isabella were being competitive – he knew their skills, and they were definitely reining them in to not intimidate the boy too much. Soon, the family was laughing together, running around the garden, having the time of their lives.

Lady Emily watched on indulgently. Jasper thought about the warning she had given him. She was obviously protective of her friend, but Lady Isabella didn’t seem to give two hoots if she was gossiped about. She simply did not care.

He watched Lady Isabella breathlessly running around, playfully swiping her brother. Her golden hair was falling loose from its bun, and she had hitched up the hem of her gown so that her ankles were exposed. She was so very beautiful and carefree that his breath caught in his throat.

He had never met a woman quite like her.



His heart flipped over in his chest. He must watch himself very carefully for there was no hope of ever having her for his own. He instinctively knew that he would end up with a very broken heart if he forgot that, even for a moment.

Lady Isabella Finch was out of his league. She was so far out that she practically inhabited another world entirely.

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Isabella walked to the edge of the gardens, watching as Jasper Burnet mounted his horse. She thought he was going to just ride away without looking. But then, at the very last minute, he looked up, seeing her.

Her heart almost stopped beating entirely.

He smiled slowly, acknowledging her by a slight tilt of his head. She smiled back. Their eyes lingered on each other for a moment before he turned the horse around, heading down the long driveway and through the high wrought-iron gates of the estate.

He was gone.

“You like the blacksmith’s son, do you not?” It was Emily’s voice, just behind her.

Isabella turned around, staring at her friend. Was she being so very obvious? And how was she supposed to answer?

“I can tell,” continued Emily in a quiet voice. “I have never seen you look at a young man that way before. Not at any time. And we have been to many balls and parties together, Isabella. You have shown no interest at all in the gentlemen.”

Isabella bit her lip, watching her father and Nathaniel walking slowly off towards the house, carrying the swords. Their heads were bent together, and her father had one hand on his son’s shoulder. Her heart melted to see it. They had all had such a good time together playing with the swords. A rare time when Nathaniel was not isolated with his head buried in a book.

She took a deep breath, turning back to her friend.

“I admire him,” she replied slowly. “He is a skilled swordsman, as well as being a very nice man. That is all.”

“Truly?” asked Emily, arching her eyebrows.

Isabella stared at her crossly. “What do you want me to say, Emily? He is the son of a blacksmith. Even I know that I can never like him in that way.” She smiled wickedly. “And I am surprised at you even suggesting it, young lady.”

Emily turned pink. “I am not suggesting you *do* anything with him,

Isabella! The very thought is preposterous!" She hesitated. "But you can admire him from afar, I suppose. There is little harm in that, is there?"

"Lady Emily Lymington," said Isabella in a mock scolding voice. "You are scandalous!"

They stared at each other for a moment. And then, they both burst into laughter, clutching their sides. Isabella gazed at her friend warmly. Just when she thought she had Emily all figured out, she would often surprise her like this, in such an unexpected way. How dearly she loved her friend.

They linked arms, walking slowly back into the house. Isabella was so very glad she had a friend like Emily. It would be a very lonely world without her.

As they walked into the house, she thought of Jasper Burnet again. He was very admirable. But it wasn't just his skills as a swordsman, nor his friendly demeanour.

She liked him in the way that a woman likes a man. And she had no idea what to do about it at all.

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Jasper slowly reached into his knapsack slung around his shoulders, taking out an apple. He bit into it thoughtfully as he meandered slowly on the horse through the woods.

He glanced up. It was a truly glorious day. The sun was hot on his head, and the sky was a clear crystalline blue. Birds were swooping through the air, calling to each other. The branches of the trees hung low, almost touching his shoulders, as he rode by, thinking about Lady Isabella. Despite all his good intentions, it seemed he just could not get her out of his head.

He heard voices as he passed by a stream. Laughter. He glanced over. A young man and woman were chasing each other along the bank. He saw the remains of a picnic nearby. They had obviously just finished eating.

The man caught up with her, grabbing her by the wrist. Breathlessly, she tried to swat him away, but he was having none of it. Before Jasper's astonished eyes, they kissed passionately, falling to the ground entwined in each other's arms.

Hastily, he looked away, his face burning. He didn't want to spy, however inadvertently, on the young lovers. He just hoped they had not heard him and were disturbed. They looked so carefree and in love. Who knew how many opportunities they had to be alone with each other?

His heart thumping, he kept on the path. He felt like he had fire instead of blood suddenly running through his veins. All he could think about was the fact that he wanted to do the same thing with Lady Isabella Finch. He wanted to kiss her and pull her into his arms and never let go. The need was so fierce and strong that it shocked him.

He had never felt such desire for a woman before.

He smiled ruefully. He had lain with women, from time to time, as all young men did. It had been very enjoyable. But none of them had set him aflame like this. He had always supposed it was because he did not wish to settle down; he thought perhaps he was denying himself something because it would complicate his life when he wanted no complications.

But it had obviously been no such thing.

He just hadn't met the right woman before.

His face burnt with mortification. The irony of it. He finally was feeling true desire, and it was for a woman that could never be his. He couldn't even take a quick tumble with her in the hay to slake the thirst. She was a lady. And not just any lady. The daughter of a duke, who was only just below a prince.

His heart flipped. It was going to be torture to keep seeing her, knowing that he could never have her. He had been enjoying going to Highbury Manor, but now, he didn't know whether he should go back. It rather seemed like he was playing with fire.

## Chapter 8

Isabella stifled a yawn, glancing at her father with a pained expression upon her face. An old acquaintance of the Duke's, Mr. Desmond Cluett, had called upon them, bringing along his nephew Arthur, and her father had insisted that she join them for afternoon tea in the garden.

She had never been able to stand Mr. Cluett. In her opinion, he was a boring old windbag, always pontificating about the church, the country, and the evils of young people, in that order. She had only met his nephew Arthur once before and had yet to form an opinion about the young gentleman. But now, after having listened to him drone on for over twenty minutes, it seemed that Arthur Cluett was as tediously intolerant as his uncle.

She studied him covertly as she sipped her tea. Arthur was probably in his mid to late twenties. He was a fastidious looking man with oiled black hair and a pince-nez perched on the bridge of his long, thin nose. His face was also thin, with hollow cheeks. He had an angular build, all arms and legs.

She shuddered delicately. She truly did not think she had ever seen a more unappealing gentleman in her life.

A vision of Jasper Burnet suddenly reared unbidden into her mind. The blacksmith's son had more charisma in his little finger than Arthur Cluett had in his whole body, she thought despondently. And yet, it was Arthur Cluett and his ilk who were in the pool of gentlemen that she had been told she must choose a husband from. It seemed so unfair that she almost screamed.

She had been dreaming about Jasper Burnet constantly since his last lesson with Nathaniel at Highbury Manor. It did not seem to matter how much she scolded herself that it could never be. The fantasies just kept intensifying. She had simply never met a man like him, who had made her feel this way.

She took a deep breath. He would be returning to Highbury Manor tomorrow for the weekly lesson. She could barely wait.

“Isabella?” Her father’s voice punctured her reverie.

Hastily, she turned towards him, almost dropping her teacup.

“I am so sorry,” she said, her face burning. “What did you say?”

“You are away with the fairies, Isabella,” scolded her father, wagging a finger at her. “For shame.”

“I was asking what your favourite Bible passage is, my dear,” said the elder Mr. Cluett, looking pained. “Do you have a verse that you return to, again and again?”

Isabella felt panicked. She rarely read the Bible and had no favourite verses at all. Desperately, she looked at her father for help. The Duke coughed into his hand, staring at her sympathetically.

“Isabella and I rather like the Old Testament,” declared the Duke

heartily. "Genesis. The story of Moses parting the Red Sea. Such majesty."

"Indeed," said Isabella, forcing a smile onto her face. "Good old Moses. He knew how to draw a crowd."

There was a shocked intake of breath. Mr. Cluett senior had a pained look on his face as if he had just sucked on an extremely sour lemon. Arthur Cluett adjusted his pince-nez, gazing at her steadily as if she were a strange insect that had suddenly wandered in his path.

Her father burst into a fit of nervous laughter. "Moses knew how to draw a crowd," he repeated, shaking his head. "He did indeed! You are an unconventional thinker, my dear!"

Isabella hid her smile behind her teacup, barely controlling a burst of hysterical giggles. She knew if she indulged them, she would shock the visitors more. A young lady wasn't supposed to have such high spirits, after all. A young lady was supposed to sit like a painted doll propped on a chair.

She shifted uncomfortably as Mr. Cluett senior launched into a pious sermon about his favourite Bible passages. Her eyes glazed over. The boredom was so extreme it was almost like a physical weight sitting within her chest. How she longed to be outside. As soon as this visit was over, she headed to the stables and went for a very long ride.

Suddenly, she was conscious of Arthur Cluett. The gentleman was still staring at her in an almost considering way as if she were something he had just spied in a shop window that he was seriously considering buying. The stare was almost rude, she felt, in how blatant it was. Her face burning, she stared down at her teacup. How much longer must



she endure this?

*I shall not speak for the rest of the visit, she vowed. Perhaps I shall just fade into the background, and Arthur Cluett will lose interest in me entirely.*

She made good on her vow, not speaking again until finally, the visitors rose to leave. But when Arthur Cluett bent over her hand, farewelling her, she saw how his eyes burnt. She hadn't put him off. If anything, she may have just piqued his interest further. When they were gone, she turned to her father with a pained expression on his face.

"Well, that went rather well," said the Duke, a forced note of joviality in his voice. "A splendid visit."

Isabella burst out laughing. "Oh, Papa! How can you say such a thing? Mr. Cluett is tedious and always has been. I do not know why you tolerate him." She wrinkled her nose. "And his nephew is an odd-looking gentleman, is he not? Quite a milksop."

"Isabella," scolded her father, his mouth twitching. "You must not say such things. Mr. Arthur Cluett is a perfectly respectable gentleman, even if he is not to your tastes."

Isabella sobered abruptly. "You would never force me to court and marry a gentleman such as he, would you, Papa? You are quite committed to me choosing a suitor of my own if and when I desire?"

The Duke looked astounded as if the thought had never occurred to

him. For a long moment, he simply gazed upon her, almost sadly.

“You are getting older,” he said slowly, tears in his eyes. “My vivacious little girl is no more. You are a young lady. I often forget. Marriage is the only thing that young ladies are supposed to think about. You shall soon fly the nest...”

Isabella rolled her eyes. “Papa, stop being so dramatic! I have no plans to fly the nest anytime soon.” She hesitated. “But it is something we should talk about. I just want your assurance that you shall not push me into a courtship with someone who does not make my blood sing.”

The Duke coughed into his hand, looking a little embarrassed. “You have my assurance, Isabella. I would never force you to court anyone who you do not genuinely admire. You should know you do not have to seek reassurance on that score. I am committed to your enduring happiness in all walks of life.”

Isabella nodded, feeling very relieved. If Arthur Cluett was persistent in his marked interest in her, calling at Highbury Manor again to see her, then she was free to put him off. She would have done so anyway, even if her father said it might be fortuitous to encourage the gentleman. But hearing the assurance from her father’s lips meant a lot. It meant that he respected her choices.

*If only I could choose Jasper Burnet, she thought suddenly. How would Papa react if I told him I was sweet upon the man?*

For a moment, she was tempted to say it, just to gauge his reaction. But then, she stopped short. As much as her father liked Jasper Burnet, he was still the son of a blacksmith. He was so far below her social station that her father, even though a kind and tolerant man,

would never consider it in a hundred years. The very thought was ridiculous, and Papa would be shocked indeed.

She sighed heavily. She knew she must stop thinking about Jasper Burnet in this way. But she didn't know how. It was as if her thoughts and feelings were growing wings, and she was unable to ground them any longer. Their flight was simply inevitable.

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Restless after dinner that evening, Isabella suddenly decided to take a long walk in the gardens. It was a beautiful night, and the moon was as full as a ripe peach in the sky. She grabbed a shawl, tossing it over her shoulders, and slipped out of the house.

For a while, she simply walked before she realised her feet were taking her to the stables. The horses were all in their pens for the night, and there was no one about. She visited her favourite horse, a white mare called Sooky. The horse put her head over the gate, neighing with delight, to see her. Isabella stroked her long, silky nose, wishing she had thought to bring an apple. Sooky loved apples more than anything in the world.

Her heart started to race as a shocking thought occurred to her. The evening was truly beautiful and so very light, with the full moon. Could she just saddle Sooky and go for a short evening ride?

She bit her lip in an agony of indecision. She often went riding by herself during the day. But she had never contemplated it alone at night. But then, who would ever know? She could go out and be back before anyone ever knew. The stables were unmanned until daylight. And her father and Nathaniel thought she was in her chambers.

Her heart leapt. She was going to do it.

Quickly, she saddled the horse, leading her out as quietly as she could. Once she was at the edge of the gardens, she mounted, cantering across a field. She knew better than to go into the woods at night. There were whispers that thieves and robbers lurked there, awaiting innocent passers-by. She grinned as the breeze lifted her hair. And then there were the fairies and elves, of course.

The moon hung low in the sky, illuminating her way. The field was open, bare of trees or bushes. Nothing was stopping her. It was as if the night was laying itself out for her, daring her to become one with it.

She bent low, urging Sooky on. The horse did her bidding, as always. Soon, they were flying across the field. The only sound was the hoot of an owl in the distance. A thousand tiny stars glittered above her. She felt as if she were entering a jewelled dome or a kaleidoscope. The thrill of being truly free within nature was intoxicating.

The sound of the horse's hooves beat within her, matching her heartbeat, merging with her blood. She and Sooky were as one creature, in tune with each other's movements. She laughed aloud with the sheer joy of it.

When she reached the end of the field, where the woods began, she drew up the horse. Silently, she gazed over the landscape. A white mist was crawling along the ground in tendrils. Tears sprung into her eyes, and she closed them, never wanting this magical moment to end.

Here, she could truly be herself. Here, she was unrestricted by all the petty rules and regulations imposed on a woman of her class. She was not a hothouse flower, destined to bloom briefly, before withering. She was an independent person with a free will of her own. And it was only when she was alone in nature that she saw the truth of it and could leave it all behind.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. She didn't want to marry a gentleman like Arthur Cluett, but she knew that unless she wished to be an old maid, she must. Any gentleman of her class would try to put her in that hothouse and make her wither.

Her heart seized, thinking about Jasper Burnet. Instinctively, she knew that he would not. That she might be her true self with a man such as he.

## Chapter 9

Jasper carefully placed the swords back where they belonged. The lesson was over with for the day. The young lord, who would one day be a duke, had just fled the room as if the very hounds of hell were on his tail.

He thought about the boy. Nathaniel was still a very reluctant pupil. It wasn't as if the boy was actively rebellious, refusing to do it. He was just quiet and sullen and did everything Jasper asked as if it were the greatest trial. The boy rarely smiled or spoke. It was as if he had made up his mind that he couldn't get out of these lessons, and he just had to get on with it.

There was a slight cough behind him. He swung around. Lady Isabella was standing there, watching him. His heart started to thud uncomfortably in his chest. She looked almost angelic in her white muslin morning gown with her curly golden hair like a halo around her beautiful face. Her green eyes were sparkling.

He cursed underneath his breath. He had truly thought he might get away without seeing her today. This strong attraction was making his job difficult. Why was she here?

“My Lady,” he said shortly, bowing.

She smiled. It seemed to spread across her face like sunshine. His heart flipped again.

Slowly, she walked to him, stopping just inches away. He smelt her perfume. It was a floral scent. Perhaps lavender.

“My father wanted me to see you,” she said. “He wanted me to apologise on his behalf that he is not able to speak with you today. He had an appointment in Shrewsbury and left just after breakfast.” She paused. “He did not want you to think him rude.”

Jasper’s eyes widened. “I would never think that,” he said quietly. “His Grace has been nothing but kind to me. I am very grateful.”

Her smile widened. “He is a darling, is he not? My father never acts the grand duke. I am truly a very lucky lady to have him as a father.”

Jasper nodded, not knowing what to say. It seemed as if she wished to talk with him. The fact that a lady such as herself was even condescending to do so was odd. But then Lady Isabella Finch was not like every other lady, was she? He had already learnt that about her. The lady who takes wild rides by herself around the countryside and plays pranks on unsuspecting people.

“How is Nathaniel getting along?” she asked suddenly.

He sighed. “He is very obedient,” he replied slowly. “He does everything I ask of him without question.”

Isabella frowned slightly. “Yes, he is an obedient boy most of the time. But that does not mean he is enjoying it, does it?”

Jasper shrugged. "You would know more about that than I would, My Lady. He seems reluctant and shows no enthusiasm for the sport at all." He hesitated. "I am trying to engage him, but he is rather reserved. I hope that he comes out of his shell soon."

Isabella bit her lip. "Nathaniel loves reading more than anything in the world," she said slowly. "It is hard to drag him away from it." She paused, gazing at him, her eyes large and sad. "He has never been the same since our mother passed away when he was only four years old. He became withdrawn, and I am sure he sees books as his escape. That is one reason our father wanted you to do these lessons with him – to get him out of that shell hopefully."

Jasper nodded, feeling a pang of pity for the lad. Just because he would one day become a duke didn't mean life was a bed of roses for him. Everyone had their problems in this life, whether they were rich or poor, privileged or not.

"I understand how he feels," he said gruffly. "My own ma passed away when I was a lad, too. It is a hard road to travel down."

Isabella's eyes shimmered with tears. "She did? What was her name?"

"Peggy," he said slowly, his heart twisting. He had not said his mother's name aloud in a very long time. Maybe years. "Well, it was Margaret really, but she was known as Peggy to everyone."

"What a pretty name," said Isabella, smiling. "Our mother's name was Caroline. But Papa's pet name for her was Carrie. I can still hear him calling to her..."



Jasper gazed at her. A wave of emotion seemed to rush between them.

“I often wish she were still here,” continued Isabella, her face twisting. “For so many reasons.” She laughed mirthlessly. “I would probably have turned out a proper young lady if she had lived. But Papa has let me run a little wild. I think he did not know quite how to raise a daughter by himself. My Aunt Jemima says he has spoiled me.”

“I think you are perfect just the way you are,” he said quickly, then was appalled that he had said it. It was rather too close to the truth about his feelings towards her. How would she react? He felt his face flush with mortification.

But Lady Isabella just laughed, gazing at him with delight. “You are very sweet to say such a thing! But I know that everyone thinks I am too wayward. I cannot help it. I have such a restless nature and want to be free and have adventures.”

“As do I,” said Jasper, smiling back at her. “It seems we are the same, in that way.” He hesitated. “But I am not able to express my true nature either, My Lady. I was born to a life that I have no choice but to follow just as you do.”

They stared at each other without speaking for a moment. Their eyes locked. He almost felt as if he was drowning within the green depths of her own.

“Do you like working in your father’s shop?” she asked.

He hesitated. "I do not dislike it," he said, struggling to express himself. "My father has worked hard to build a good business. But he is an artisan and deeply loves his craft. I have no such calling for it. It is just a job for me, although I do love swords. I try hard...but that is the truth of it."

It was the very first time he had ever voiced the conflict he felt over it. He expected to feel immense guilt for being so disloyal to his father. But instead, he felt suddenly light, as if a huge weight had been lifted from his soul.

Lady Isabella just stared at him steadily. She didn't look shocked or disappointed. How could she be? She knew nothing about the problems in his life and probably did not care anyway. The life of a blacksmith's son was very removed from the problems of her own. But somehow, she seemed to understand.

"It is strange," she said slowly, tilting her head sideways as she kept staring at him. "I know that our lives are so very different. But they are not dissimilar. We both are being forced into moulds that do not fit us. What is the solution, do you think?"

He shook his head. "There probably is none, Lady Isabella. We must do our duty, and that is all there is to it. Not many people have true freedom in this life anyway. Most do not. It is just the way of the world."

She blinked rapidly. "Perhaps. But then...sometimes... some people are bold enough to try anyway. To forge their own path, through disapproval, and the expectations of all around them." She paused. "I admire them."

He felt his colour deepening again. A full flush rose up over his body. She looked so very earnest, which was unlike her. He was used to seeing her laughing and mischievous. The fact that she felt so deeply about being constrained within her world was almost a revelation. He had never truly thought about how hard it might be to be a woman or a lady. For someone who did not wish to live by the tight rules society imposed upon the fairer sex.

He thought of Susannah. She was not a lady, but she was constrained like Lady Isabella too. But Susannah had no qualms about it. She was happy within her world and her life. She did not wish for anything different; she did not desire a life she could not have.

But he did. And so did Isabella. It might be for wildly different reasons, but strangely, he felt as if another bond had just been forged between them.

“I should keep packing up,” he said awkwardly, not knowing how to deal with the sudden closeness between them. “My father expects me back to Collstock by the afternoon.”

“Of course,” she said quickly. She reached around, picking up one of the swords he was just about to put away. “I am delaying you.”

She passed him the sword. Their hands brushed against each other as she did so. It was as if a fire had just sparked to life between them. His hand was tingling.

Her eyes widened with shock, the pupils dilating. So, she had felt it too. She jerked her hand back so that the sword almost slipped out of his grasp. Her cheeks were glowing bright pink.

“Thank you, Mr. Burnet,” she said quickly, almost running to the door. “I shall see you next time.”

And then she was gone, as quickly as she had arrived.

He flexed his hand, still feeling the aftershocks of her touch. If this was how his flesh reacted at the slightest contact with her own, how good would it be to truly touch her? To explore her with no care in the world but the pleasure they created together?

Shaking, he carefully placed the sword back on the shelf. He had thought he was playing with fire, and now he knew he definitely was. There was strong desire between them, but it wasn't just that. Talking with her had developed a bond that he could not fathom. It was as if he had just met someone who truly understood him for the very first time in his life.

*You cannot have her. You know that.*

His heart twisted. Why did they have to be from different classes? If she were a village lass, he would not hesitate. But she wasn't. She was a lady of the manor, and it just wasn't possible. There was nowhere in this world where they could explore what was between them. The whole world would condemn them for it. His world, as well as hers.

He had been brought up to know his place. No one ever moved out of the constraints of their class. He had been taught it was God's will. And he had never given it much thought until now. He had never desired a woman he could not have.

His father would be shocked beyond words at even entertaining the notion. Josiah Burnet was a deeply conventional man. He would be appalled that his only son was lusting after a high-born woman and not knowing his place. He would tell him that he must let it go, for both their sakes. Hers, as well as his.

Jasper turned, picking up his knapsack, his heart thumping. He needed to get out of Highbury Manor this very minute. He didn't know what he was doing here anymore. He was flirting with danger. It could not end well if he let it continue. How could it? Anything that was between him and the Lady Isabella was doomed from the start. And that was the harsh truth of it.

## Chapter 10

Isabella gazed anxiously towards the stables. Jasper hadn't arrived at Highbury Manor yet. He wasn't ever late. Had something happened to him?

But then, she let out a breath of relief as she saw him riding through the wrought iron gates. Slowly, she walked towards the stables. He saw her, slowing down the horse, before dismounting hastily.

"My Lady," he breathed. "I was not expecting you to greet me."

She smiled, her heart beating frantically in her chest. Her reaction at being close to him seemed to grow more intense every time. It had been bad enough last week when they had spoken alone in the sword room. She had not been able to get him out of her mind since.

"I am so sorry," she said, taking a deep breath. "My father is absent from the manor, and Nathaniel has suddenly taken ill. It happened just after breakfast. I sent him to bed, and he is as happy as a clam reading, propped up on his pillows."

Jasper's face fell. "Oh, I am sorry to hear that." He hesitated. "I suppose I should leave then..."

"No," she said quickly. She hadn't meant to sound so abrupt. "I mean...you have ridden all the way out here, and it is such a fine day..." she bit her lip, then continued hastily on "...I am just about to go for a ride. Would you like to join me?"

He stared at her looking gobsmacked, as if she had just started spouting a foreign language. She waited, restlessly, for him to say something. Anything.

“That is a kind offer,” he said slowly. “Very kind indeed. But Lady Isabella, I do not think your father would approve of me accompanying you alone on a ride. He might say that I do not know my place.”

She flushed. “Oh, but we shall not be alone! My friend Emily, who you have met, is here for the very purpose. As is my Aunt Jemima. It was already planned.” She hesitated. “You would just be one more in the party. And I feel so very bad that you have come all the way here for nothing. Let me make it up to you.”

He looked torn. She could tell the thought of a ride appealed to him, but he was trying to do the right thing – he didn’t know if it was appropriate or not.

“My father would not mind,” she said quickly. “He likes you, Jasper Burnet. And he admires you. All the rules of chaperonage are in place. He would not think it odd.”

He nodded slowly. “Well, it is a glorious day for it...”

Her heart soared. “Indeed it is! Let me go and get my companions, and we can be away. I do not wish to waste a single moment of it.”

Triumph surged through her veins as she quickly made her way back to the house. He had agreed. She was going to spend time with him. And she simply could not wait.

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Jasper watched Lady Isabella expertly guiding her white horse through the woods just ahead of him. She was dressed in an elegant riding habit, as were her two companions, who rode ahead of her. He still couldn't believe he had agreed to this. It seemed strange to be riding with them all. Very strange indeed.

Isabella's friend, Lady Emily, had greeted him rather coolly but had not looked askance that he was joining their party. And he had been introduced to Isabella's Aunt Jemima, or Lady Jemima, to give her the proper title. She was a tall, thin older woman with eyes like a hawk. They had flickered over him, a little disapprovingly. She had not said much. Within ten minutes, they had been away, riding beyond the estate and into the woodlands.

Isabella slowed her horse down so that he was riding alongside her. She glanced at him, smiling slyly.

"You can tell me now how pleased you are that I twisted your arm," she said, her green eyes glittering with mirth. "I know you would not have liked to go back to the blacksmith's shop for the day."

He laughed. "I cannot deny it. Being cooped up indoors all day in the heat is not appealing. It feels like an inferno sometimes." He took a deep breath. "I would much rather be outdoors, breathing the fresh air."



“We can pretend that we are on an adventure if you like,” said Isabella, her smile widening. “We might be searching for lost treasure, perhaps, or going on a quest?”

He laughed again. She was so completely guileless. Sometimes, it was easy to forget she was a grand lady. She seemed just like the village girls he had grown up with. Lady Isabella Finch wasn’t one to put on condescending airs and graces.

“Why don’t you decide,” he said, playing along. “I shall follow you on the adventure, My Lady.”

“Hmmm,” she said, tilting her head sideways in contemplation. “Let us do both. It is a quest to find a fairy toadstool. There are not many about yet, as it is only just turned autumn. And if we do find one there might just be treasure beneath. How does that sound?”

He laughed again. “It sounds like a great lark. Is there a prize for who spots one first?”

She considered this. “Well, there might well be treasure beneath it, as I said,” she replied in a mock, grave voice. “But let us feel free to decide a prize for the other. If I find it, you must give one to me, anything you like. And if you find it, I shall do the same. We will not tell each other what the prizes shall be. Do we have a deal?”

He gazed at her warmly. “We do indeed.”

She took a deep breath. "Very well then. Let the hunt begin, Mr. Burnet." She paused, staring him straight in the eye. "May the best man win."

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Isabella watched him covertly, his eyes scanning beneath the trees for the distinctive red with white spots mushroom known as a fairy's toadstool. He liked to play, and his competitive side had been roused. It was another thing they had in common. She always enjoyed a hunt and liked to come out the winner.

She glanced ahead quickly at the two riders ahead of them. They had lagged behind Emily and Aunt Jemima by quite a considerable distance. She knew they would have to catch up with them eventually, but she was reluctant to do so. Not quite yet. She wanted him all to herself for just a little while longer.

She looked back at him. His face was tight with concentration, searching the woods. Suddenly, his eyes lit up, turning his horse to the right. She watched with delight as he sped off into a darkened corner, beseeching her to follow him.

"There!" he cried triumphantly, pointing to a mossy knoll, beneath a rock. "I knew I saw it!"

She laughed, dismounting Sooky. "I cannot say you are the winner without examining it closer," she said in a mock prim voice. "It must be a fairy toadstool. Some mushrooms are very similar. We do not want to give away the prize too easily, do we?"

He grinned, dismounting as well. They walked slowly to the mossy enclave, squatting down, peering intently into it. Two mushrooms – one large, the other considerably smaller – had sprouted there. They both had spindly white stalks, and the caps were a glossy red with white speckles.

He turned to her, his grin widening. “I think you must concede defeat, Lady Isabella. Not one, but *two* fairy toadstools. I am clearly the winner.”

She laughed, staring at the mushrooms. “Yes. They are clearly fairy toadstools.” She bent closer, examining them. “But alas. There is no treasure beneath them. The fairies have not left their pots of gold.”

“A shame,” he said, bending closer, as well. “It seems the fairies have not been out to play yet. Perhaps they shall do it tonight, under cover of darkness.” She could feel his breath warm against her skin.

“Would it not be wonderful to watch them?” she giggled. “An expedition to spy the fairies at play.”

“They would run away,” he said, his dark eyes shining. “They do not like to be watched by humans. It spoils their fun. They would rush back to Fairyland, their game spoilt. I think it would be a failed mission.”

She turned her head slowly, studying his face. “I am game if you are.”

He looked astonished. “You want to meet at night in the woods to hunt for the fairies?”

She giggled. “It would be such a lark! We could bring lanterns and snacks to eat along the way.”

He kept gazing at her. She could tell he didn’t know whether she was serious or not. She decided to put him out of his misery.

“It is quite alright, Mr. Burnet,” she said, her mouth twitching. “I am not asking you to steal away at dead of night to chase fairies in the woods. I am only having a joke.”

He laughed. “I knew that, of course! I could hardly imagine a lady such as yourself climbing out your window to run into the woods.”

“I *would* do it,” she declared, her eyes sparkling. “But even I am mindful that the woods are not safe at night.” Her eyes narrowed. “Unless we entered them together, of course. That would be a different story entirely.”

Their gaze met and held. Isabella suddenly realised how close their faces were. They had been getting slowly closer the whole time.

“And now for your prize,” she whispered slowly. “Fair is fair. A deal is a deal.”

He frowned slightly, looking mesmerised. “What is it?”

Slowly, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“There,” she said, hastily standing up and brushing the dirt off her hands. “You have your prize, Mr. Burnet. I hope you think the hunt was worth it.”

He got to his feet, gazing at her in a dazed way. Her heart started thudding painfully in her chest. It had been a very chaste kiss, but it was still a daring thing to do. How was he going to react?

“Oh, it was worth it,” he whispered, his dark eyes glittering fiercely. “More than worth it.”

The air seemed to thicken between them. Her heart raced faster still, feeling like a bird fluttering within her chest, desperate to escape.

“We should go,” he whispered eventually. “The others...they will be wondering where we are...”

“Of course,” she said quickly. “Let us continue on.”

They walked slowly to the horses, mounting them and heading back onto the path. Her face was burning. She felt strangely exhilarated in a way she had never felt before. As if they had crossed another invisible barrier between them.

She knew she shouldn't have done it. It had only been a quick kiss on the cheek, but it was still forbidden. It was not as if he was a close friend of her own class or a relative. He was her brother's fencing teacher and below her in every way. She knew that any of her family or friends would be shocked by it. If Emily or Aunt Jemima caught wind of it, she would be bundled back home under the threat of scandal.

Isabella raised her chin defiantly. She didn't care anymore. She didn't know what was happening between them, but she wasn't going to stop it. Instinctively, she knew it was too late anyway. They were growing closer every single time they saw each other.

And the day was young. There was more to explore within these woods. She felt a tingle of excitement at the very thought. She would try to find another opportunity for them to be alone again. And next time, the kiss might not be so very chaste at all.

## Chapter 11

Jasper reached up and touched his right cheek as they rode further into the woods. It was still burning from the kiss Isabella had planted upon it. It was as if she had scorched his skin with her lips.

He turned, watching her carefully, as she rode alongside him. He still couldn't believe she had the audacity to do such a thing. A grand lady, the daughter of a duke, had spontaneously planted a kiss upon the cheek of a blacksmith's son. It was unheard of. It was shocking.

And that chaste kiss had been more exciting than anything he had ever felt in his life.

Perhaps he *should* have expected it – she had been acting very flirtatiously with him as they embarked on their playful hunt for a fairy toadstool. He couldn't help responding to her. She was almost irresistible to him. But it had still shocked him when she had kissed him. He hadn't been expecting her to take it that far at all.

How far *was* she willing to take it?

His loins stirred painfully at the very thought.

And now, she was casting coquettish glances at him over her shoulder as they rode. His loins stirred anew. He was playing a very dangerous game now. And unless he abruptly told her he needed to head home and leave her and her companions to their ride within the woods, he could not change what was going to happen. He almost wished he

could.

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They rode on for another half hour, meandering deeper into the woods. Her companions did not glance back at them, even though they were lagging behind at a substantial distance. Jasper didn't know what to make of that at all. Were Lady Emily and Lady Jemima giving their tacit approval? Or were they simply oblivious to what was going on between him and Isabella?

"Look!" cried Isabella suddenly, pointing to the left. "A shepherd's hut. I sheltered there once when I sprained my ankle on a ride." She turned, gazing at him steadily. "It is rather remote, is it not? Almost like a secret hiding place."

He gazed at the little hut. It was so hidden beneath the low-lying branches of tall trees that he probably would have just passed it by. It was a little ramshackle but perfectly sturdy. He had never seen it before, even though he had ridden through these woods many times. But then, she lived closer to them. The woods were almost like an extension of her backyard.

"Yes," he said, trying to figure out what she was exactly saying to him. It was almost like a challenge in some ways. He brushed it off. She wouldn't be so daring as to suggest they go there, was she?

She didn't say another thing about the hut. She simply turned her face back to the path, continuing on. But there was a slight smile upon her face, almost smug. His loins stirred anew. They were almost aching now. It was painful being in her close vicinity. His mind whirled with a succession of fantasies about her.



Suddenly, she turned her horse left, venturing down a slight embankment towards a small stream. He frowned. What was she doing?

He hesitated a fraction of a second before following her. Their companions were so far ahead now they probably had no idea where they were. A wave of uneasiness swept over him, warring with his lust. But he simply could not help himself.

She quickly dismounted, crouching near the stream, cupping the water in her hands and drinking deeply. He hesitated again before dismounting and following her lead. The water was very cold and pure. He drank deeply as well; he hadn't realised how thirsty he was.

He was still drinking as she stood up, walking away. He was intent on his task and did not watch her. Suddenly, he felt the cold tip of a blade against his neck.

Astonished, he gazed up at her. She held a sword in her hand, and her green eyes were glittering fiercely. She wasn't smiling.

"What...what are you doing?" he whispered. He hadn't even noticed she had brought a sword with her on the ride. He had been too intent on her.

"I am challenging you to a fight," she said slowly. "Are you game?"

He stared at her, so shocked he didn't know what to say.

Abruptly, she grinned, taking the tip of the sword away from his neck. She walked back to her horse, taking another sword off the back of the beast. Quickly, she threw it at him. He only just caught it.

Slowly, she raised her sword, circling him, grinning the whole while.

"Lady Isabella," he said, his throat parched dry despite the water he had just drunk. "We really should not..."

"Why ever not?" she challenged, flicking back the golden curls tumbling around her face with one hand. "I brought the swords just in case. Emily and Aunt Jemima have ridden on, and if they come back, all they will find is the two of us sparring. There is nothing wrong with that, is there?"

He hesitated, so torn he didn't know what to do.

Suddenly, she lunged, flicking his right arm with her blade. A trickle of blood emerged. He gazed down in surprise at his arm. The minx had cut him!

He took a deep breath, his heart racing now. She would pay for that.

He raised his sword, lunging back. There was a slight clink as their swords connected. And then, they were furiously sparring, back and forth, so quickly that he almost couldn't see the swords moving

through the air. She was still grinning, her green eyes like glittering emeralds as she quickly moved. She thought she had the upper hand.

He smiled, greatly enjoying it. She truly was an excellent swordswoman – she was giving him a run for his money, that was for sure. And she was competitive. He could tell that she was determined to win, and she honestly thought she would.

His smile widened as a rush of excitement shot through him. Let her think that. The moment would come when he would show her how wrong she was.

Carefully, he attacked, slowly backing her towards a tree. And then, he saw his chance. A slight flick at the right angle, and he managed to dislodge the sword from her hand, sending it flying through the air.

He pinned her against the trunk of the tree. She wasn't grinning now. Her chest was rising and falling, her face thunderous.

He laughed, letting his sword fall. "A good fight, Lady Isabella," he said, panting with exertion. "But there can be only one winner, after all."

He expected her to smile again, graciously conceding defeat. But instead, she stiffened, glaring at him.

"I could have had you," she hissed, her green eyes looking like those of a snake now, on the attack. "I could have won at any time. I was just playing with you. I *let* you win."

He smiled. "Come now, Lady Isabella, we both know who the victor was. I had you under my thumb the whole time. But you *did* fight well."

She kept glaring at him. Stiffly, she marched away, picking up her sword. She was furious. He gazed at her, not knowing what to say. She had been the one who wanted to fight, after all. And now she was acting like a spoilt child who had just been denied a toy.

"Isabella," he said, reaching out and taking her arm. "It was only a play fight..."

She rounded on him, shaking off his arm, her eyes still glittering fiercely.

"Do not touch me," she huffed, raising her chin. "I cannot endure it! Let us continue on the ride and forget that this sorry event ever occurred."

He stared at her in amazement. "You are a very sore loser, My Lady."

Her chest rose and fell in fury. She actually stamped her foot. "And *you* are patronising me! I shall not have it!"

"I am not," he shot back, his anger rising now. "You are being ridiculous. You are the one who insisted we fight. Do not get angry now, just because you lost."

She muttered under her breath, pushing past him. He couldn't help himself. His arm shot out, barring her way. Incredulous, she looked up at him.

"Let me go," she hissed. "Now!"

He knew he should obey her. She was a lady. She was his superior. But the anger was rising within him now, and he forgot all that. All he could see was a beautiful, furious woman who was acting like a spoilt child.

And she *was* simply irresistible.

He pulled her into his arms, their faces close. He felt her hot breath upon his face. They glared at each other for a long moment.

And then, without him even knowing how it happened, their lips met and they were kissing. Furiously. Passionately.

His blood was on fire. Her lips were so soft. He groaned with need, pulling her closer. She twined her hands into his hair, forcing his head lower. The kiss deepened. He lost sense of time and place. All that existed was her. He never wanted to let her go.

The whole world be damned.

Still connected, they tumbled onto the ground. His hands brushed against the bodice of her gown, feeling the soft swell of her breasts. He plunged one hand beneath the fabric, cupping one, feeling the hard nipple. Another hot, sharp stab of desire tore through him.

He wanted her more than he wanted anything before in his life.

Vaguely, he heard a woman's voice calling Isabella's name. He cursed, pulling back. She stared at him, her eyes large, her chest rising and falling.

Hastily, he pulled her to her feet, brushing leaves off her gown. They quickly walked back to their horses just as Lady Emily walked down the embankment, staring at them in amazement.

"Isabella," she said crossly, her face fierce. "We have been calling you! What are you doing here?"

"Nothing," said Isabella hastily, gazing at her friend. "Nothing at all. We stopped for a drink from the stream, that is all..."

Lady Emily's nostrils flared. "Do not lag behind! We probably should be heading back now. Your aunt is tiring."

"Of course," said Isabella quickly, her face mottled pink. "We shall have afternoon tea before you both leave. I am sorry, Emily. I was just thirsty, that was all."

Her friend nodded, mollified. She climbed back up the embankment, where Isabella's aunt was still atop her horse. Lady Emily was mounted within a minute, and the two ladies were away, heading back towards Highbury Manor.

Jasper stared at Isabella, not knowing what to say. She didn't look at him. She simply mounted her horse. With a frantically beating heart, he did the same. Carefully, they retraced their steps and were back on the path.

His hands gripped the reins tightly, his mind whirring in confusion. He shouldn't have done it. He should have resisted her. He had compromised a lady. What would happen now?

He did not dare look at her for fear of seeing fury in her face. Accusation that he had taken advantage of her. But when they were riding through the gates of Highbury Manor, he dared to glance at her. And was shocked.

For Lady Isabella Finch was gazing straight at him, and there was no longer fury in her face. Her green eyes were soft and shining. She was smiling radiantly. She looked like a woman who was very pleased indeed with what had happened between them.

His heart skipped a beat. For the life of him, he didn't know what to do. He felt like he was being dragged along a path, and he could no longer control anything. He was a man in the grip of a desire that he had simply never felt before. God help him.

## Chapter 12

It was late afternoon by the time Jasper got back to Collstock. He tethered the horse, then went straight to the shop. His mind was still a raging whirlpool of confusion, and he didn't know what to do at all.

His father was sitting at his workbench, polishing a sword. Timothy was hard at work in the other corner. His friend smiled at him but bent his head back to his work. Jasper knew that Timothy was still unsure about talking while on duty if his father was there. He was so intent upon securing his apprenticeship he didn't want to jeopardize it in any way.

"Ah, there you are, Jasper," said his father, wearily. "Come and sit down and tell me about your day."

Jasper did as he was told, sitting across from him. He gazed at his father, frowning slightly. He looked exhausted. His face was pale, almost ashen, and there were dark circles underneath his eyes. But he smiled pleasantly. He was obviously pleased to see him after the long workday.

"Timothy," called his father. "You may pack up for the day, lad. Come and join us."

Timothy straightened, smiling, doing his master's bidding. They didn't speak until his friend was seated as well.

"Well?" asked Josiah, gazing at his son. "How goes it at Highbury



Manor?”

Jasper sighed heavily. He didn't know whether to tell them that there had been no lesson that day and that he had gone for a ride through the woods instead. It seemed indulgent, given that they had both been hard at work here. He really should have refused Isabella's invitation and returned to Collstock to help the two men.

But he must be honest. Or as honest as he could be, without causing offence. They both deserved that much, at least.

“The young lord was feeling poorly,” he said slowly. “The lesson was cancelled.” He hesitated. “The lady of the manor asked if I would accompany her and her companions on a ride through the woods instead. I thought I could hardly refuse.”

To his surprise, his father didn't look disappointed in him at all. Instead, he beamed at him.

“Very good,” he said, his smile widening further. “That is very good indeed, Jasper! It shows that the Duke's family likes you very much to think to include you in an outing. To think, my only son, being invited to accompany one of the Duke's children!”

Timothy smiled archly. “Was it a good ride?”

Jasper cleared his throat. “Yes, the day was fine. A long ride. But perhaps I should have refused and come back here to help you both instead...”

“Nonsense,” said his father briskly. “You could not refuse an invitation from a grand lady. It would have looked rude. We have managed well without you.” His eyes shone. “I am very proud of you, son. The whole family likes you. When you take over the shop, I have no doubt they will still order from here. They are very good customers, after all. The Duke always pays handsomely and supplies us with steady work.”

Jasper nodded, feeling guilty. If his father knew the real reason the Lady Isabella had invited him on a ride through the woods, he would not be so pleased at all. He would be furious, saying that Jasper was forgetting his station, dangerously dallying with a lady so far above him.

It was obvious to him now that Isabella was as interested in him as he was in her. It wasn't his imagination or wishful thinking. She was attracted to her brother's fencing teacher and did not seem particularly conflicted about it. Or if she had been, she was resolving it without much effort.

And he had a decision to make – whether to let himself be swept along with it or stop it now.

He had wrestled with it the whole way back from Highbury Manor. He had been resolved for half of the journey that he would tell his father immediately that he could no longer teach the young lord. He wasn't prepared to go to Highbury Manor anymore. He would find an excuse that he wasn't suited to teaching or some such thing. It seemed the only way to stop what was happening between him and Isabella.

But for the other half of the journey, he had been defiant. He wanted her very much. She wanted him. If they were careful, they could indulge that desire. It could never have any future, of course, but why

couldn't they live in the moment? They were both trapped within their separate worlds and desired freedom. Perhaps they could find it for a short while with each other.

He still didn't know which voice to listen to. The voice of reason or the voice of desire.

"Well, I am away for an afternoon nap," said his father, standing up and stretching. "Can you both pack up? You may call me when dinner arrives from the Allens. I should not miss it again, considering Mrs. Allen goes to so much trouble for us. I have already done so twice this week."

"Of course, Pa," said Jasper quickly. "Leave the packing up to us. I will call you when Susannah arrives."

Their father nodded gratefully, leaving the shop.

"He is looking so tired," said Timothy, frowning. "He retires to his bed almost every afternoon now and sometimes does not rise again until the morning."

Jasper sighed heavily. "I know. He has told me that he is thinking of retiring for good soon. And if he does not improve, I think it likely."

Timothy studied him carefully. "And what do you think of that idea, my friend? It means you shall be in charge of the shop. It will be yours."

Jasper looked away. How could he tell his friend about the conflict in his heart? The desire to lead his own life versus the desire to do the right thing by his father? Timothy might be appalled, and he would hardly blame him. The shop was thriving; it was a good living being handed to him on a platter. Not many men would even contemplate refusing it.

He forced a smile onto his face. "It will be sad to see Pa retire, but he has trained me for this my whole life, so I will be ready when the time comes."

Timothy's frown deepened. "You don't sound too enthusiastic, Jasper. I suppose it *is* a big responsibility." His face turned wistful. "I would love it. It would be a dream come true for me. But I will be happy working under you, of course."

Jasper stared at his friend, his heart twisting in sorrow. The awful irony of it. Timothy ardently loved being a blacksmith and would seize the opportunity of running this shop with both hands. While all he could feel was how chained he would be to it; that somehow, his life was over. His friend should have been the great Josiah Burnet's son and not him. He was not worthy of the honour at all.

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Jasper was silent at dinner that night, pondering the strange day. He felt Susannah's eyes upon him often, but he didn't even have the energy to talk with her like he usually did. They were almost finished when she turned to him, her eyes bright.

"Would you like to go for a walk after dinner, Jasper?" she asked. "It

is such a lovely evening.”

Jasper hesitated. The last thing he felt like was going for a walk. He had been planning to just go to bed and hopefully still his troubled mind. His father was grinning at him, and so was Timothy.

“What a great idea, Susannah,” said Josiah, nodding with satisfaction. “A nice stroll around the street and the square. You would be up for an excursion with such a lovely young lady, wouldn’t you, Jasper?”

Jasper sighed. “Of course, Susannah. I would be delighted.”

Susannah looked so pleased he instantly felt guilty. She was such a good friend, always there for him. It was churlish to even think of refusing her.

They set out as soon as dinner was over, heading down the main street. It was a beautiful night – the moon wasn’t quite full but still shed a pearlescent light upon their path. The sky was the colour of a ripe plum, with a thousand stars glittering in the heavens.

No one was about. All the shops were shut for the evening. The only sound was muffled laughter from the tavern at the other end of town where a few locals were having some evening ales. A soft breeze surrounded them, but it wasn’t cold. Not yet, at any rate.

Susannah tightened the shawl around her shoulders. “You seem troubled lately, Jasper. Is there anything wrong? You are not quite yourself.”

He forced a smile onto his face. What would Susannah say if he told her the daughter of a duke was sorely tempting him? He could just imagine the shock and horror on her face. And the hurt.

“I am just worried about Pa,” he said eventually, which wasn’t a lie. “He is getting older. I can see it in his face. Work wearies him more than it used to.” He hesitated. “I think he will be retiring soon.”

Susannah nodded slowly. “Yes, I have noticed myself. Some nights he doesn’t even stay up for dinner, he is so exhausted. My mother and I have talked about it, worrying about him.” She paused. “Are you ready to take over the shop?”

He nodded, smiling at her. What else could he do? But his heart was so heavy he couldn’t speak for a moment. He stared dismally at the moon, fighting back tears.

He couldn’t have the life he wanted. He couldn’t go journeying, having adventures, as free as the wind. He couldn’t have the woman he wanted, either. He was as trapped within his life as a bear within a cage at a travelling circus, gnawing desperately at the chain.

He knew he was being indulgent, wallowing in self-pity. He knew that his life was good in so many ways. He had a home, and a father who loved him. A good living. Security. He knew that he could have the woman by his side if he wanted her as a wife. She was a good woman who would give him a wonderful home. He didn’t doubt it.

“Jasper...” Susannah’s voice was a whisper. She placed a tentative hand on his arm. “You know how fond I am of you...”

His heart clenched. "As I am of you, dear Susannah," he said quickly. "I think we should turn back. It has been a long day, and I am very tired. Is that quite alright?"

"Of course," she said, biting her lip, only just masking her disappointment. "Ma will be wondering where I am, as well."

They turned around, walking back. Susannah bowed her head, silent. He cursed himself for even hurting her this much. It seemed like he could do nothing right. Whatever he did, whatever way he turned, someone would end up getting hurt. Including himself.

After he left Susannah at her home, he wandered upstairs, collapsing onto his bed. His father was already asleep; he could hear the muffled snores from the next room. Wearily, he sat up, pulling off his boots and staring at the wall.

He would return to Highbury Manor. He knew that he shouldn't – that if he did, he was committing to something he might have no control over. But very soon, real-life would intrude. He would have to make his peace with it. But in the meantime, there was Isabella. She hovered like a dream before him. And he wanted to reach out and grab that dream, with both hands, before the chance was gone entirely.

He was going to live just for himself. And the future be damned...just for a little while.

## Chapter 13

Sighing, Jasper lay down the sword, staring at the sullen boy opposite him. Nathaniel was doing everything asked of him, but he was miles away in his mind. As always.

The boy stared at him, lowering his own sword. “Are we finishing early?” There was a plaintive note of hope in his voice.

Jasper sighed again. “Let us just leave it for now,” he said. “Put down your sword. Let us go for a ramble through the gardens. I would like us to talk and get to know each other better.”

The boy nodded, looking wary. The swords were put away, and then they walked out of the manor, down the path and into the gardens. It was an overcast day; grey clouds scudded through the sky, but there was no threat of rain yet. They had time.

Jasper glanced back at the house. He hadn’t seen Isabella this morning. He was trying very hard to ignore the heavy disappointment. Had she changed her mind and no longer wished to encourage what was between them? He knew he should be relieved if that was the case. But all he felt was an unbearable sorrow at the very thought.

Resolutely, he turned to Nathaniel, pushing the thought of Isabella out of his mind. First and foremost, he had a duty towards the lad. That was why he was at Highbury Manor, after all.

“Do you like going for walks, My Lord?” he quietly asked the boy.



“What are your favourite things to do?”

Nathaniel glanced at him shyly. “I do not like walking that much,” he replied slowly. “I am not as active as my father and sister, who are always wanting to be outside.” He hesitated. “I like reading, most of all. That is my favourite thing in the world. And I like to write my own stories too. I like playing the piano and have got quite good at it recently...”

Jasper nodded. The lad was clearly not the athletic type. No wonder he was not enjoying these lessons. And yet, Nathaniel was not clumsy nor lacking in natural ability in that area. He was quick on his feet and highly intelligent, able to deduce the strategy involved in fencing. He could be quite good at it if he only gave himself the chance.

“What kind of books do you like to read?” he asked.

Nathaniel smiled. “I like adventure stories most of all,” he said, his smile widening. “I am almost finished with *Waverley* by Sir Walter Scott. It is set in the highlands of Scotland during Jacobite times. It is quite thrilling!”

Jasper laughed. “I do not know much about that place or time,” he said. “I do not have much time for reading nor the opportunity to acquire books.” He paused, gazing at the boy carefully. “But I do like the sound of such an adventure. I have always dreamt about travelling and going on adventures. It would be so exciting.”

Nathaniel’s eyes shone. “Sometimes I imagine I am the adventurer in the books I read, and it is *me* having those adventures.” He ducked his head shyly. “It is silly, I know, but I cannot help it.”

Jasper laughed again. "It is not silly at all," he insisted. "We all have dreams." He hesitated. "You know, you may have the opportunity to go on such adventures when you are a man, Lord Nathaniel. And if you commit to developing your skills with the sword, they may aid you on those adventures. It is good to know how to defend yourself in the wide world, after all. You never know when you might need them."

Nathaniel frowned, pondering this for a moment. When he next looked up at Jasper, his eyes were shining.

"You know, you are right," he said, in a voice filled with wonder. "I have never thought about it in that way before! I would love to go adventuring when I have the chance, and everyone in the books I read knows how to use a sword!"

Jasper just stopped himself from ruffling the boy's hair. It would not be the proper thing to do to a young lord. But he was filled with a sense of affection towards the boy. He was very likeable, once one got to know him. And this might just be the breakthrough moment he needed with him.

"I can teach you," he vowed, staring hard at the lad. "I can give you all the skills you need with the sword to help you on your adventures. You just need to work hard and commit to it. You could be very good, you know. I am not just saying that. It is only your attitude towards it that is hampering your progress, Lord Nathaniel."

The boy's face filled with pleasure. "Truly? You think I could be as good as Papa or Isabella?"

Jasper nodded. "I do. But it is up to you. I can teach you everything, but it will be for nothing unless you truly want to learn. What do you say?"

The boy stared into the distance. Then he turned back to Jasper, nodding slowly. His eyes were still shining with the light of determination. A light that Jasper had never seen before.

"Let's do it!" he declared, smiling. "Now that I see the purpose to having skills with the sword, I want to learn!" He paused. "Thank you, Mr. Burnet. It is...nice having you around. You are not like anyone I have ever met before."

Jasper laughed. "Oh, I am not so special. But I am very pleased we have spoken. Shall we return to the sword room now? We still have fifteen minutes before the hour is up."

"Yes!" declared the boy. It was as if he was filled with a new sense of purpose.

They turned, walking back into the house. Jasper was filled with satisfaction. He was as committed to Nathaniel as the boy was to him now. He wanted to be here, teaching him to become as good a swordsman as he could be. He wanted to teach him well.

He glanced towards the front of the house as they rounded the corner, just in time to see Isabella, walking out, on the arm of a tall, thin gentleman. They were trailed by her Aunt Jemima, who was obviously acting as chaperone. Instinctively, he bristled, feeling quite unfamiliar and alarming jealousy. Who was the man? Was he a suitor?

He tried to push it away as despondency settled over him. He had no claim to her and never would. And if Lady Isabella Finch was courting a gentleman, it was none of his business. He just had a job to do here, and that was that.

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Isabella saw Nathaniel and Jasper walking into the house. How she wished she was with them, rather than being forced to go for a stroll with Mr. Arthur Cluett, who had just arrived at Highbury.

Her father had sent word just after Jasper arrived at the house for his lesson with Nathaniel that the gentleman was here to call upon her. She was running late dressing for the day, as she was taking extra care with her appearance for Jasper. She had been planning to descend to the sword room during the last five minutes of the lesson. But now, that was all up in the air. He would probably have left by the time she got rid of the odious Mr. Cluett.

She glanced back at Aunt Jemima, who was trailing them, looking bored. Her aunt was staying with them for a few days and had agreed to act as chaperone. It was a pity, in some ways. As much as she loved her aunt, if she hadn't been here, this walk would never have taken place. She could have used the excuse that it wasn't proper to go for a stroll with him without a chaperone.

"And how have you been, Lady Isabella?" asked Mr. Cluett, his nostrils flaring. His eyes drifted over her appreciatively. "How charming you look today. That pale blue gown suits your golden loveliness indeed."

Isabella forced a smile onto her face. The gown was one of her favourites, and she knew the colour suited her well. But she was wearing it for Jasper, not this man. It had been *him* she had imagined complimenting her about it, *his* eyes widening in appreciation, not this gentleman's. The morning wasn't panning out how she had envisioned at all.

"I have been tolerably well, I thank you," she replied stiffly. "And thank you for the kind words, Mr. Cluett. It is just an old thing that I threw on with little thought."

He smiled in a patronising way. "You young ladies are all so modest! Which is proper and fitting, of course. I do not like a lady who is too ostentatious. It is not right at all."

Isabella just stopped herself from rolling her eyes. What an utter and insufferable prig he was. She had met his type before. Many times over.

Her heart shifted. Jasper wasn't like that. He was not like any man she had ever met. She bit her lip with pure frustration. If only Jasper Burnet were from her own class. It could be *him* escorting her for a stroll now, instead of this gentleman. Life just wasn't fair at all.

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After Mr. Cluett had blessedly left, Isabella determinedly knocked on her father's study door. She was filled with sour disappointment. By the time she and Mr. Cluett had returned to the house, Jasper had left. Her chance to see him this day was gone. She was determined that it wasn't going to happen again.

Her father was sitting behind his desk. “Isabella,” he said, putting down his quill. “How are you, dearest? Did you have a pleasant walk with Mr. Cluett?”

Isabella raised her chin. “That is why I am here, Papa. I must have your assurance again that I am free to choose my own suitors because I am not eager to continue an acquaintance with Mr. Cluett at all. And it seemed to me that he called upon me today as the first step to courting me.”

The Duke stared at her. “Isabella, we have already spoken of this. I shall not force you to court any gentleman who you do not like.” He frowned. “I had no idea Mr. Cluett was intending to call today if that is what you are asking. I am not tacitly encouraging him to pursue you, my dear.”

She sagged with relief, her eyes filling with tears. “Thank you, Papa. Because I simply cannot abide him at all. I do not wish to cause friction between you and his uncle, but that is just how it is.”

“Of course,” said her father, looking surprised. “We are in perfect harmony on this, Isabella.”

She nodded. The relief was immense. Her father wasn’t pushing her to court the man. Thank the Lord. Now, she knew what she was going to do.

Her heart thudded painfully. It was time to take matters into her own hands. She had missed her chance to see Jasper this morning but the

day wasn't over yet. It could still be salvaged.

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It was Timothy who gave Jasper the note after he had returned for the day.

"This arrived from Highbury Manor," said his friend, staring at him curiously.

Jasper broke the red wax seal. His heart started racing instantly.

*Jasper,*

*Forgive my boldness but will you meet me at the shepherd's hut in the woods, at eight this evening? We can go hunting for fairies...or do anything else that we might like. I shall hang a lantern in the window. I hope you have the courage, for I surely do.*

*Isabella*

Hastily, he crumpled up the note. Timothy was still staring at him curiously.

"What is it?" asked his friend. "You look like you have seen a ghost."

“Do I?” His voice was faint. “Just a change to the lesson next week. That is all.”

She wanted him to meet her at the hut in the woods. At night. Unchaperoned.

His heart raced harder, and his stomach lurched sickeningly. What was he going to do?



## Chapter 14

Isabella placed the lantern in the window of the old hut, appalled to see that her hand was shaking. Now that she was here, she couldn't quite believe her own audacity.

She had sent a note to Jasper, requesting that he meet her here alone. At night. It was shocking. It was scandalous. It could ruin her entirely if anyone found them here.

And still, she was determined to do it.

She gazed around the hut. It was cold, and it was dusty. There wasn't anything much in the hut. A small hearth with the remains of an old fire within it. Some blankets in a corner. Cobwebs hung in long chains from the roof.

Her mouth went suddenly dry. She was here alone, in the woods at night. She had no guarantee Jasper would come. And that lantern in the window could attract any traveller through the woods, curious as to why there was a light emanating from this old hut. She was starkly aware that she was vulnerable. She had brought a sword, of course, and could defend herself if necessary. But still. Had she been too impetuous this time?

Her blood froze. She could hear movement outside; a rustling. It might be an animal, but she didn't think so. She held her breath. And then, there was a soft knock on the rickety door. Her mouth went dryer still as she took the risk, opening it wide. Her sword was leaning against the side of the door where she could grab it quickly if necessary.

Jasper stood there, framed in darkness. He was wearing a long, black cloak. His breath hung in the frigid air, emanating from his mouth like steam.

“There you are,” she whispered, almost sagging with relief that it was him and not some cutthroat trawling through the woods.

He stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He gazed down upon her.

“Here I am,” he agreed in a soft whisper.

They simply stared at each other for a long moment. She knew at that moment that they were equally committed to this path. They had turned a corner and could not retreat now. Whatever was going to happen between them was inevitable.

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Jasper lit a small fire in the hearth, fanning the flames with his breath. It sprang to life immediately. Isabella sat down on a blanket next to it, holding up her hands to get warm.

“I am very grateful you know how to light a fire,” she said, smiling shyly at him. “It is a skill I poorly lack in.”

He smiled wryly at her, settling back on the blanket next to her. "I suppose you have never had much reason to do it," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "In your world, fires are lit by other people."

She smiled sadly. "You do not judge me for that, do you? That my life has been so much more privileged than your own, through no fault of mine?"

He laughed softly. "Of course not, Isabella. We do not choose our places in life. You were born to be the lady of the manor and I was born to be the son of a blacksmith. It is not our fault at all."

She pushed a stray curl behind her ear, thinking about it. It wasn't fair, but then, life wasn't fair. She just fervently wished she could bridge the divide between them, once and for all. Show him that just because she had been born to be the lady of the manor did not mean she thought any less of him.

His face turned sober. "We are both taking a great risk doing this," he said slowly. "But I am more mindful that it is you who would suffer more if we were discovered. Your fall would be harder, Isabella. You could lose everything, whereas I do not have as much to lose. People would just say *what can you expect from a low-born man...*but they would crucify you."

Her heart thumped uncomfortably. "Yes, I know. But I am not a conventional lady of the manor, Jasper. Have you not discovered that by now? I desire a different life and I am determined to follow my own path." She hesitated. "The only reason I would hate scandal surrounding me is that I would hurt those I love – my father and brother. As for me, I can face anything that society throws at me, if necessary."

He smiled slowly, reaching out a hand to tuck another stray curl behind her ear. She couldn't breathe for a moment.

"You are the most fearless woman I have ever met," he whispered, his eyes shining. "Whether lady or not, I have not met any woman with your bravery and zest for life. You are truly one of a kind, Lady Isabella. A very rare person..."

A glow came over her, and tears sprang into her eyes. She knew she hadn't been mistaken about him. He truly did like her, just the way she was. He admired who she was as a person. It wasn't only about the fire of desire that roared so strongly between them.

"As are you," she whispered. "You must believe me when I tell you that I have never met a man like you before, Jasper. It is as if our natures speak to each other. As if we understand each other in a way that no one else can. We are both blackbirds in a swan's nest, out of place in our worlds, desiring more from life than what we have been given."

He laughed softly, caressing her face. "Yes. It is true. I have never felt truly at home in my world. I have always been the odd one out, wanting more from life." He paused, gazing at her earnestly. "It is the strangest thing...but it is as if I have met my someone who finally understands that. And it is because you feel the same way. Although we are worlds apart, we are the same."

She basked beneath his words and the feel of his hand, so tenderly caressing her face.

"Shall we forget about who we are and the demands of our worlds,

just for a little while?" he whispered. "I know our worlds will eventually drag us back, but for now...can we pretend it is just us?"

She nodded mutely, her heart flipping over in her chest. She desired that more than anything.

No promises were being made between them. They were both pragmatic enough to know there couldn't be.

But they had this night, and it would have to be enough for the moment. She would sacrifice anything to at least have this. The future could take care of itself.

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They didn't speak again. With a sigh, he leant towards her, finding her lips. He explored her mouth gently. She felt the passion simmering just beneath the surface, but it was constrained. It was a kiss that was sealing their words more than anything. A kiss that showed how much they liked each other, as well as how much desire there was between them.

His hands found her face again, fingers trailing down her neck and through her hair. She gasped within her throat. It was almost unbearably beautiful and tender.

Abruptly, the kiss deepened. Her lips opened beneath his, and she felt his tongue darting into her mouth, probing it, opening it wider. They fell onto their backs. He was above her, kissing her passionately, his hands roaming over her body. Everywhere he touched felt as if she

was suddenly on fire. As if he was singeing her with his hands.

“You are so very beautiful,” he whispered against her lips. “The most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

She felt a painful lump form in her throat, thick with emotion.

“And you are the most beautiful man,” she whispered. “I have never met one more beautiful...”

His head ducked lower, liberating her breasts from her gown. And then, his mouth closed over one nipple, sucking with abandon. She gasped, her eyes opening wide with bewildered pleasure. She had never felt anything like it before in her life. It was as if his mouth was possessing her, causing jolts of incredible sensation to shoot through her body.

What sweet madness was this?

She arched her back, drawing him closer, as hungry for him as he was for her. His lips trailed to the other nipple, sucking it as deeply. Her head tossed from side to side in pure abandon. It was as if she was possessed with the deepest hunger of her life. Warm wetness seeped out of her, and all she wanted was to press herself against him, closer and closer, with a mad desire to feel him.

Feverishly, he reached under her gown, finding the core of her. As he suckled, his fingers explored her depths. She gave a strangled gasp. It was amazing. It was as if he was unlocking something so primal within her that rational thought was simply impossible. She had never

felt such delirious abandonment in her life.

And she knew, instinctively, that it was only him that could do this to her. That he was the key as well as the conduit. Everything came back to him. No other man could unleash this sweet madness within her.

She arched her back again. The sensations were growing, building, gathering momentum, like a snowball gathering snow as it hurtled down a hill. Despite the chill in the hut, she felt a sweat break out over her body. She was moaning, now, tossing her head from side to side. She wanted – no, needed – release, but from what? She didn't understand it at all.

And then, abruptly, it arrived. A pinnacle of sensation, crystallising within her. It seemed to rush at her, as through a tunnel, crashing over her, again and again. She cried out in bewildered pleasure. He didn't stop for a moment. If anything, he intensified the embrace, suckling fiercely as his fingers stroked her hard.

And then, it was receding as quickly as it had arrived.

He stopped, pulling away from her, gazing at her with burning eyes. His face was glazed with lust.

“What was that?” she whispered. Her face was glowing, and there were tiny aftershocks of pleasure rippling through her body. “What divine madness?”

He smiled slowly. “It is the pleasure, Isabella. The pleasure I can give you...and I can have my own, as well.” He paused, gazing at her

tenderly. “But that can wait for tonight. It is enough to see such sweet abandon in you. It was as if you were giving me a gift. I shall never forget it.”

She sighed, not really understanding it, but so very glad it was there. That she had gathered her courage and done this. That she had ignored her misgivings and brazenly invited him here so they could explore what was between them.

He gathered her up in his arms, whispering words of endearment into her ear. She had never felt more loved or safe in her life. They had spun a cocoon around them; as if nothing existed outside of their bodies, pressed against each other.

Her eyes filled with tears. How could she give him up when the time came?

For she knew that it surely would. This idyll could not last forever. They could snatch moments to be together, but it couldn't last. The demands of the real world would intrude eventually. How could she bear it?

Desperately, she pushed the thought out of her mind. They had agreed to simply live in the moment. It must be enough. It *had* to be enough.



## Chapter 15

The next morning Isabella was staring dreamily into space as Pauline finished her hair. She couldn't stop thinking about the magical thing that had happened between her and Jasper last evening. She had barely slept after he had escorted her back to Highbury Manor, farewelling her with a lingering kiss.

"You are away with the fairies this morning, My Lady," said Pauline tartly, her mouth full of hairpins.

Isabella stifled a giggle. She was indeed away with the fairies. So very far away that she didn't know how she was ever going to return to earth. She wanted to stay in that magical place forever.

There was a knock at the door. Keyes, the butler, entered.

"There is a caller for you in the drawing-room, Lady Isabella," he remarked gravely. "Mr. Arthur Cluett."

A furious frustration arose in Isabella's chest at the words. Mr. Cluett had only called upon her yesterday, and here he was again. He hadn't even had the decency to send a note to ask her if it was convenient for him to visit. He was just blithely sailing into Highbury Manor, demanding attention as if it was his right. As if there was some unspoken agreement between them.

She had to put a stop to it.

She turned in her chair, staring at the butler. "Very well," she said crisply. "Tell Mr. Cluett that I am still at my toilette and shall be at least another fifteen minutes if he cares to wait." She took a deep breath. "And if not, then he is quite at his liberty to leave."

Pauline's eyebrows rose. Keyes was impassive, as always, merely bowing and leaving the room to do her bidding.

"I am almost finished here, My Lady," said the maid. "You can go and receive your visitor now if you wish..."

Isabella smiled icily at her maid in the mirror. "That is not necessary, Pauline. Mr. Cluett can wait, or he can leave. I shall go to the drawing-room when I am good and ready."

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She waited the full fifteen minutes before she slowly descended the staircase, walking towards the drawing-room. She truly hoped she had put him off; that he would not be sitting there waiting for her. But to her dismay, he was still there, standing at the window.

She took a deep breath before entering.

He turned, gazing at her. "Lady Isabella. How lovely you look. Indeed, you are glowing."

*That glow has nothing to do with you, she thought darkly. And it is about time you realised that it never will.*

She smiled frostily. "I was not expecting you, Mr. Cluett. A note to say you intend to call would be polite. I do not sit around Highbury waiting for gentlemen callers, I will have you know."

He looked shocked. "Oh...I just thought since we had such a pleasant stroll yesterday, you would be receptive to another..."

"Indeed," she said crisply. "Unfortunately, I am rather busy this morning." She paused, staring at him steadily. "I have called for tea. I am afraid I can only spare a half hour or so. Please, sit down." She waved a hand towards the seats.

He looked stunned as he did her bidding, sitting opposite her on the velvet chaise lounge. They didn't talk as the maid arrived with the tea service, pouring in silence. When she left, he coughed into his hand, staring at her longingly.

Isabella sipped her tea before putting the cup down with a decisive clatter. This wasn't a pleasant thing to do at all – she didn't like treating people this way. But Mr. Arthur Cluett had to know that she simply wasn't interested.

Thus far, she had been docile, simply letting it happen. But she saw now that wasn't the way forward. It was only encouraging him. Gentlemen such as he liked women to be passive listeners. He didn't care if she hardly spoke and appeared disinterested. He just thought of it as a challenge and the proper way a lady should behave.

"I must be frank, Mr. Cluett," she said slowly. "I am not interested in marriage with you. And you appear to be calling upon me thinking that we are courting." She paused. "Nothing could be further from the truth. I am not receptive to it. I do not mean to cause offence, but I think it far crueller for you to keep calling upon me when there is simply no hope. I do hope that you understand."

She saw the flash of anger in his eyes. He didn't like that. He didn't like it at all. Had a woman ever spoken to the priggish, entitled gentleman the way she just had? She thought probably not. Mr. Arthur Cluett was used to women doing his bidding.

But then, to her surprise, a condescending smile came over his face. He laughed softly. She didn't join in. She simply stared at him, wondering what on earth he was going to say.

"It is right and proper that you are being so demure about it," he said slowly. "A lady should never offer overt encouragement to a gentleman. It is your duty to resist and mine to persist."

"Mr. Cluett," she said in a shocked voice. "I can assure you that I am not indulging in feminine wiles at all. You must believe me that I am telling you the honest truth. It is not a calculated ruse to fan the flames of your admiration higher."

He laughed again in an almost smug way. She was so infuriated she simply could not speak for a moment. How dare he say such a thing to her? To act as if she had barely spoken, brushing her words aside, even though she'd told him frankly of her feelings on the matter?

“I think your dear father might think differently on the matter,” he said, picking up his teacup and staring at her over the rim of it in a patronising way. “This is often business conducted between gentlemen, my dear Lady Isabella. But your sweet reticence on the matter is quite endearing.”

Isabella’s jaw dropped. The man was simply insufferable. She wanted to reach across the space between them and slap him soundly across his smug face. She could almost see that pince-nez he always wore flying through the air and smashing to the ground, the lens shattering. She would stand up and stomp on it, twisting the glass beneath the heel of her shoe before flouncing out of the room.

She took a deep, ragged breath. Of course, she could do no such thing. Apart from anything else, Mr. Cluett’s uncle was friends with her father. She couldn’t just ruin that relationship, even if dear Papa did not truly care for the elder Mr. Cluett that much. She must control herself. But it was very, very difficult.

“I think you are mistaken, Mr. Cluett,” she said in a tight voice. “My father would never force me into marrying a gentleman I do not care for. We have spoken on the matter, and we are in perfect harmony. I do assure you.”

A maddening half-smile spread across his face. “We shall see, Lady Isabella, we shall see.” He put down his teacup, rising to his feet. “I shall not delay you any further since you have other engagements. It has been a pleasure as always.”

She stood up stiffly, staring at him. At least he was leaving. That was something. The fact that he hadn’t listened to a single word she said was still infuriating, but he would get the message eventually. How could he persist in this if she outright rejected him? There was only so far he could go with this sham courtship thinking she was playing

hard to get.

She would speak with Papa about it. Immediately. Her dear father might have some advice on how to handle this alarming matter.

“Have a good day, Mr. Cluett,” she said in a sour voice.

He smiled, ignoring her tone entirely. “And you, Lady Isabella. Until we meet again.” He bowed, walking out of the room.

She gazed after him, her hands balling into fists by her side. She hadn’t anticipated he would be this persistent after she had been so frank with him. There was something very odd about the man. A wave of uneasiness swept over her. Decisively, she strode out of the room, heading towards her father’s study. This definitely could not wait.

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Her father was reading his newspaper when she entered. He put down the paper, gazing at her in surprise.

“Isabella,” he said. “You look very upset, my dear. What is it?”

She paced the room for a minute, so angry that she couldn’t speak. All she could see was Arthur Cluett’s patronising face. Her father waited patiently.

Eventually, she sat down opposite him, taking a deep breath.

“Mr. Arthur Cluett just called on me again,” she said, fighting back the tears. “I told him in no uncertain terms that I was not interested in courting him, and he laughed in my face. He told me that it was business between gentlemen and that *you* were receptive to it.”

The Duke shook his head wearily. “Isabella, there is no such agreement between us,” he said, looking pained. “Mr. Cluett has not even spoken to me on the matter. And if he did, I would tell him that you are not interested, and I would never force you into a courtship or engagement against your will.”

She gazed at him uncertainly. “You are not just humouring me then? You respect my decision on the matter? I need to know, Papa. I understand how the world works and that many fathers take these matters into their own hands and believe that their daughters will resolve themselves to it eventually...”

He sighed heavily. “Isabella. My marriage to your dear departed mother was a love match. She had other offers, and my own parents tried to line me up with other ladies they thought more suitable than she.” He paused, his eyes shining with tears. “We stood steadfast. We would have no one but each other. Do you truly think I could force any of our children into loveless matches when I have known the joy of being with my true soulmate?”

Isabella bit her lip, her eyes swimming with tears. She knew how much her parents had loved each other. They had been devoted to one another. The knot of tension within her started to unravel slowly. Her father had given his word to her, and he truly understood how she felt. He would not force her into marriage with Arthur Cluett even if the gentleman stubbornly refused to believe it.

“He is a very strange gentleman,” she said slowly. “He gives me the cold shivers, Papa. I do not wish to compromise your friendship with his uncle, but I cannot encourage him in any manner. I have already been forceful, and he has ignored it.”

The Duke shook his head. “Arthur was always an odd boy. Rather intense.” He hesitated. “If it comes to it, Isabella, I shall talk to him on your behalf. Sometimes it takes another gentleman to say it before a man gets the message. Arthur obviously greatly admires you and cannot see the forest for the trees. Do not worry.”

She let out a breath, so relieved, she almost felt dizzy. Her father had her back and would protect her from the gentleman if need be. It was enough for the moment.

She bit her lip. If only she could tell her beloved father about the man who *did* fire her blood. The man who had so tenderly held her in his arms last night and ignited feelings within her that she had never dreamt existed.

But she couldn't. Jasper Burnet could never be a suitor for her hand. She didn't know how she could bear it.



## Chapter 16

Jasper covertly watched Isabella walking through the gardens at Highbury as he sparred with Nathaniel. She seemed distracted; she hadn't even glanced at them. His heart shifted with fear. Did she regret their night of passion at the shepherd's hut in the woods?

He hadn't had a chance to speak to her since. There had been a rush of orders at the blacksmith's shop, and his father had needed his total attention. They had all been working longer shifts than normal to complete the flurry of orders.

He had been forced to delay Nathaniel's fencing lesson – and he hadn't been confident enough to send her a note to explain. Apart from the fact he thought it dangerous for them to communicate in such a way. Anyone could intercede the notes, and then their relationship might be exposed. He had told himself he must wait until he could see her again. But it had been a very long fortnight indeed.

Nathaniel suddenly lunged, catching him off guard. His sword clattered to the ground. The boy grinned in triumph.

“Got you!” he crowed, jumping up and down. “First time!”

Jasper laughed. “So you did! What a swordsman you are becoming. You will be better than me one day, My Lord.”

The boy looked as proud as punch. Jasper laughed again, picking up his sword. He saw Isabella hovering in the near distance. His heart

started hammering in his chest.

“Let us call it a day,” he said to the boy. “You have worked hard and deserve it.”

Nathaniel grinned. They started walking slowly up the path towards the house. Isabella was there, staring at them.

“A good lesson?” she asked her brother, smiling kindly at him.

“Oh, yes,” said the boy, his eyes shining. “I just bested Mr. Burnet! It was so much fun!”

Isabella laughed. “I am so very pleased you are starting to enjoy your lessons, Nathaniel. And I was watching...your skills have improved so much. I am very proud of you.”

“Would you like a fight now?” asked the boy quickly. “I can show you.”

Isabella shook her head. “Not now, dear brother. But soon.” She hesitated, turning to Jasper. “Might I speak with you a moment, Mr. Burnet?”

Jasper nodded. “Perhaps you could take the swords back to the sword room, My Lord, and put them away. I will join you there in a moment.”

Nathaniel nodded obediently, taking the swords and walking off. He didn't seem to think it odd that his sister wanted to talk privately with his fencing tutor. He seemed to have no curiosity about it at all. Nathaniel was lost in the triumph of his lesson, completely oblivious to anything around him.

Jasper turned slowly to Isabella. Her perfume wafted towards him. He wanted to reach out and pull her into his arms. His hands were almost itching with the desire.

"You are doing so well with him," she said, smiling faintly. "He is coming along in leaps and bounds. Papa and I have both noticed it. He has a spring in his step that was never there before."

Jasper smiled. "He is a good lad. And I have had a breakthrough with him. He is eager to master the sword because he wants to one day go adventuring. It warms my heart to see him come out of his shell."

Isabella's green eyes swam with tears. "It seems you have been good for everyone at Highbury Manor."

They were silent for a moment. Jasper could sense the struggle within her. He didn't know what to say. They didn't have much time.

"Meet me at the hut in an hour," she whispered. "I will say I am going for a ride. We do not have to be long."

He hesitated for only an instant. How could he refuse her? And

besides, he didn't want to.

He nodded. "So be it."

She nodded quickly before scurrying off down the path. He watched her for a moment before continuing on inside. He would say his farewells to Nathaniel and the Duke and then head into the woods to meet her at the hut.

His heart flipped over in his chest. It was so very dangerous. But he was on this path now, for better or worse, and he didn't think he could refuse her if he tried.

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Isabella was already there, waiting for him, her white horse tethered to a tree. She was pale, and she did not smile. He got off his horse, walking towards her slowly.

"Shall we go in?" he asked gently.

She smiled faintly. "I think not," she said, taking a deep breath. "I cannot be long. My pianoforte tutor is due at Highbury within the hour." She paused. "I probably did not have time for this at all...but I had to speak with you."

"Isabella," he said, taking her hand. "If you are feeling shame over what happened between us, please do not. The physical love between

a man and a woman is nothing to be embarrassed by...”

She laughed. “I am not ashamed, Jasper. I am glorying in it. You have awoken something within me that I never dreamt possible. It seems to me now that I was asleep all of my life before you came into it.”

His heart raced. She wasn’t feeling bad about it. She wasn’t feeling somehow sullied that she had let a man so far beneath her touch her so intimately. He realised how frightened he had been that she would be. That all her words about them being alike might mean nothing.

“I feel exactly the same way,” he whispered, gazing at her ardently. “It does not matter to me whether you are a lady of the manor or the lowest serving wench. You are just a woman to me. The most beautiful and desirable woman I have ever met.”

She sighed with delight, her green eyes shining. But then, the light dimmed within them. She gazed away, a furrow in her brow.

“Isabella, what is it?” he asked gently, his heart twisting to see how sad she suddenly looked.

“I wish it could be this way forever,” she said, smiling wistfully. “I wish that the real world need never intrude again. I wish you were of my class so that we could court openly, Jasper. I want it so much.”

He sighed, squeezing her hand gently. He wanted to reassure her, but how could he? She spoke the truth. They could never hope to be together in the eyes of the world. They could never hope to be anything more to each other than what they were now.

“Do you wish to end it?” he asked, forcing the words out of his mouth. “I will respect it if you say so. I understand how difficult it is and what a risk you are taking with your reputation.” His face twisted. “I do not wish to ruin your life. Your chances to secure a good marriage and have a family.”

To his surprise, she gave a bark of laughter. “There is no one who could give me a good marriage, Jasper. The gentlemen in my circle are all the same. They desire a pretty painted doll by their side, who does not speak much, if at all. A lady who will be seen and not heard. Not a real partner to share their life with honestly and genuinely.”

He was silent, digesting this for a moment. “You truly do not think you will ever meet a proper gentleman who shall accept you for who you are?”

She shook her head, a scornful look on her face. “It is not possible. I am too wild, too opinionated, too much of everything for a proper gentleman. If I married one, I would slowly wither and die under the constraints of their rules.” She stared at him. “You are the only man who truly understands me. I do not think I shall ever find another.”

He sighed again. How could he tell her what was in his heart? That he felt exactly the same way about her? It wasn't that he couldn't choose a woman of his own class. There were plenty who would be more than willing to become the wife of a successful blacksmith. Susannah was one. He knew all he needed to do was make it known he was receptive to her, and they could be married before he even knew it.

They would probably all make good wives. But he didn't want any of them. They would never understand him, either – the fire within his

belly, the thirst for adventure, for a different life to the one that had been given him. They would stifle and oppress his true nature, just the same as any gentleman of her class would stifle Isabella's.

Were they both doomed? Were they destined never to find happiness in this life because they could not be with each other?

He didn't want to say it to her. He wanted her to have the possibility of a life beyond their relationship. If he told her all that was within his heart, it would only make her more dissatisfied because they could never be together.

"You are young," he said gently, the words as heavy as stones in his mouth. "There may be a possibility of a gentleman in the future who will accept you the way you are, Isabella. I do not wish to see you mired in bitterness, thinking it shall never be possible..."

He reached down, kissing her softly. She responded for a moment, melting into his arms, clinging to him. But then, she suddenly pushed him away, her green eyes fiery.

"What are you telling me?" she whispered, her eyes shining with tears. "Are you not willing to fight for us then?"

He shrugged helplessly. "Isabella, how can I? How can you? You do not seem to understand all that you would be giving up. Your entire life. You would be a scandalous lady, shunned by all. Your own father and brother might choose to disown you. How could I do that to you?"

She was silent, biting her lip. He saw the agony on her face. It matched his own. He wanted to pull her into his arms and tell her that they could be together, come what may. That they could brave the whole world, all their family, friends and community, and be enough for each other. But he couldn't.

She was still a lady of the manor, as much as she was different from other ladies. She was used to a life of privilege and wealth. If she were with him, she would lose her social status, cast off like a pariah. She would have no wealth any longer. He tried to picture her as the wife of a blacksmith, living near the shop, learning to cook and clean and go to the market for food.

It wasn't the life she had been born to. It might kill her.

He knew that she didn't want to hear it. She wanted to cling to the belief that there might be a place for them together in this world. He wanted to believe it, too. But as much as he wanted her, he was a realist. It wasn't how the world worked.

"I must go," she said quickly, her face tight with pain. "My tutor will be arriving soon."

"Isabella," he said, his heart twisting anew. "You know how much you mean to me..."

She didn't answer him. She mounted her horse, giving him a quick wave, before racing off into the woods. He stared after her, so despondent he didn't know what to do or even what to think.



Had he ruined everything between them?

He mounted his horse, heading towards home. His father and Timothy needed him in the shop. This was his life, for better or worse. And he was still none the wiser how he could resolve any of it.

## Chapter 17

Jasper strolled into the house. It was twilight. He had intended to return to Collstock straight away after his troubling encounter with Isabella in the woods, but instead he had ridden in the opposite direction. He needed to clear his head, but it hadn't worked.

The day had gotten away from him. He was consumed with guilt. His father had needed him in the workshop. Once more, it seemed that he couldn't please anybody. He braced himself as he walked into the kitchen. Susannah was already here, fussing around the menfolk, serving up big slabs of her mother's chicken pie onto plates.

They all turned and gazed at him as he walked into the room. He smiled weakly, taking his seat. His father broke some bread, passing it to him.

"A rough day, son?" he asked in that quiet way he had. It almost made it worse that there would be no words of censure.

Jasper coloured. "I was delayed. I hope it did not put you out too much..."

His father waved a dismissive hand in the air. "It was just finishing up. Putting the final touches to the Duke's new order." He paused. "You may deliver the new swords to His Grace tomorrow, Jasper. They are all ready."

Jasper nodded as Susannah put a plate in front of him, smiling

tentatively. Another wave of guilt washed over him. How good she was, coming here every night to feed them. She sacrificed her own time for his family. And even though he knew there was an ulterior motive – that she did it as a way of seeing him – he also knew that it was no hardship for her. Susannah was one of those people who lived to be of service to others.

“Thank you, Susannah,” he said, taking a deep breath. He studied her for a moment. There was something different about her. “Is that a new gown? You look different.”

She blushed prettily. “Oh, no. This old thing? But perhaps you are noticing my new shawl. I picked it up this morning.”

He nodded. Yes, the shawl *was* new. A hand-embroidered, delicate thing, in shades of pink and lemon, with a tasselled fringe. Different from the white and grey ones she usually wore. This shawl looked like it could belong to a lady or should be saved for good occasions.

“Very pretty, Susannah,” said his father approvingly. “I hope it did not cost you too much.”

“Oh, no,” she said, dimpling. “It was an exchange with old Mrs. Barton. I gave her one of my knitted scarves for it. The poor thing is starting to suffer from the rheumatism and cannot stand the cold. It was a good swap.”

“It suits you,” said Timothy, smiling broadly. “I hope it does not get ruined with work, though. It looks like it should be kept for a special occasion.”

Susannah laughed. "I am only wearing it this evening because I just got it. I could not resist." She took a deep breath, staring at Jasper. "Although I might have an occasion to wear it. There is a dance at the local hall this Saturday night, Jasper. Would you like to go with me?"

Jasper was taken by surprise. "Perhaps," he said quickly. "I am not sure what my movements will be. Can I let you know?"

She bit her lip. "Of course. It is short notice. I understand." She looked down at the table. "Ma needs me earlier this evening. Can I leave you now?"

"You do not need to ask, Susannah," said his father. "We are so grateful that you even do this for us. And give my regards to your ma. Tell her what a grand cook she is again."

"I will," said Susannah, smiling. She picked up her bonnet, tying the ribbons beneath her chin. "Well, good night, everybody."

And then she was gone.

His father turned to him, gazing at him steadily. "She is a grand lass, that one. A keeper. You could do a lot worse than Susannah Allen for a wife, Jasper. And I think you well know that you only have to say the word and she would be yours. She is devoted to you."

Jasper's face burnt. He took a bite of pie, then set down his fork.

"I like Susannah," he said slowly. "You know that I do. But I am not looking for a wife at the moment, Pa. I am too young."

His father looked unconvinced. "What twaddle. Your ma and I were barely twenty when we wed. You will need a wife when you take over the shop, Jasper. A good woman to keep house and give you a family....and a purpose, other than work."

Jasper forced a smile onto his face. "Susannah is lovely. Of course she is. I just do not know if she is the right woman for me."

His father sighed heavily. "What is there to know, my lad? Susannah is pretty, sweet and adores you. She is also a good cook and a fine worker, which you will need. You are not getting any younger, Jasper. You should be seriously thinking of it." He paused. "Perhaps it is the time to put childish things away, as the Bible says."

Jasper looked down at his plate. There was an awkward silence. It was as close as his father had ever come to admitting he knew that Jasper had other dreams in life and wasn't entirely content with the thought of settling down to become a blacksmith in Collstock.

His face flushed deeper. He could not quite believe that his father was so insistent about Susannah. Especially since Josiah Burnet had married for love. For him to push him to marry a girl just because she was there, receptive, and would make a good wife was strange indeed.

But then, perhaps it was just because his father worried about him. He suspected that Jasper did not like the life of a blacksmith as much as he did. He knew the time was coming when his son must take over the shop, and maybe his insistence that he should settle down with

Susannah was his way of sweetening the deal.

His mind drifted towards Isabella. How would his father react if he told him that he was having a liaison with the daughter of the Duke of Coventry? That of all the women in the world, it was this lady who his heart and soul and body yearned for?

The thought was ridiculous, of course. He couldn't tell his father or anybody. They would all be horrified at the very thought. The sons of blacksmiths did not dally with grand ladies. It was a recipe for disaster. He would be soundly reprimanded and called a fool of the highest order.

And he didn't think he could bear to see the look of utter disappointment in his father's eyes.

"I seem to have lost my appetite," he said abruptly and standing up, bringing his plate to the sink. "Perhaps I might retire for the evening..."

"I was going to go to the Bear and Duck for an ale this evening," said Timothy, looking at him sympathetically. "Maybe you could have one or two with me?"

Jasper smiled. Perhaps it might be good to get out of the house and speak with his friend privately. The local tavern was just a short walk away.

He nodded. "Just let me freshen up, and we can be on our way."

He didn't look at his father again. The guilt was too strong. He didn't know how to deal with it at all.

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The fire was roaring in the fireplace when they entered the small tavern. There only a few local men scattered around the tables and at the bar. Old Frawley, the innkeeper, was the only one behind the bar this evening. He grinned delightedly when he saw them.

"Haven't seen you two in an age," he said. "Two ales, is it?"

"Yes," said Timothy, placing a coin on the bar. "Make sure they are cold, my friend."

The man laughed, pouring the ales. They settled by the fire, drinking thirstily. Timothy was the first one to set his drink aside, staring at his friend.

"What were you doing today?" he asked slowly. "Really?"

Jasper shrugged helplessly. "I guess I was just thinking things through," he said, feeling the weight of guilt heavy on his shoulders again. He couldn't tell Timothy about his feelings for Isabella. "I know that I must take on the shop soon, but the thought of it weighs heavily on my soul, Timothy. And I am heartily ashamed to admit that."

Timothy pondered this for a moment, staring into the fire. Then he turned to Jasper.

“I know,” he said slowly. “You have always been different to the rest of us, Jasper. Always wanting to go off and explore the world. You have never liked the quiet life of the village. It has always been a struggle for you.”

Jasper smiled ruefully. “I try, Timothy. I try my hardest to quash it down. But I suppose the restlessness is just a part of my nature. It doesn’t mean I won’t do my duty when the time comes but it is hard for me.”

Timothy nodded. “And then your father insisting you consider Susannah for a bride was the icing on the cake, I suppose.” He stared at him hard. “You do not want to settle with her, do you? Or any girl in the village. It would be admitting that your dreams are gone, once and for all.”

Jasper took a long sip of his ale. “Yes, that is a part of it,” he admitted. “But I spoke the truth to my father. I have never considered Susannah as a wife, and I never will. I just don’t feel that way about her, and that is not fair to her, either. If I asked her to marry me, she would be miserable because I could never love her the way she deserves.”

Timothy sighed. “You are in quite a pickle, aren’t you, my friend?”

Jasper shrugged. If only Timothy knew the other half of it. The fact he was enamoured with a lady of the manor. A lady who might just recklessly run away with him if he let her. And he was sorely tempted.



That afternoon as he had been riding, he had allowed himself to wallow in the fantasy. He and Isabella, against the world, riding off into the sunset. They would not need anything but each other. Their feelings were strong. The world be damned.

It had taken the whole afternoon to let the fantasy go. It could never work. He knew that. She would miss her family and friends. She would resent him for taking her away from them eventually. Not at first, but it would happen. He had no illusions about that. She loved her family fiercely. Even if she said she could live without the good opinion of her society, it would be a wound that would fester forever, poisoning their relationship.

And he had a duty here. A life that he could not walk away from. They could not ride off into the sunset as much as he yearned for it.

They were both bound by their ties and could not loosen them.

He shifted on the seat, his heart sore. She had been angry with him today. Perhaps it was over between them, and it would be a blessing. He must hold on to that thought. They could never make each other happy in the long term.

He drained his ale. "Let us have another one, my friend. Let us just forget about it all. Tomorrow can take care of itself."

He fervently wished he could believe he spoke the truth.

## Chapter 18

The next day, Isabella was seated in the parlour window enclave. She sighed irritably, trying to concentrate on the embroidery patch in her hands. After stabbing herself with the needle three times in a row, she eventually gave up, tossing it aside. She had never liked embroidery. Perhaps she would go for a long walk to get rid of some of this restless energy she was feeling.

She glanced out the parlour window. There were ominous dark clouds in the sky and spots of rain upon the window. It was going to pour down at any moment. There was no way she was getting out today; she was housebound. The thought of it dismayed her so much, tears sprang into her eyes. She felt like a tiger, prowling its cage.

She stared at the sky, so disconsolate she could barely stand it. She wished fervently she hadn't left Jasper the way she had yesterday. He was only being honest with her. They had no future together. She knew that as well as he did. And now, she might have ruined things entirely between them. He might never speak to her again.

She blinked back tears, trying to tell herself it was for the best. If she continued to secretly see him and let him take her in his arms and indulge the passion between them, it would only be harder when the time came to end it.

She knew she was already half in love with him, and it would only blossom further if they kept seeing each other. And he had offered no words of love to her. He had told her she was the most beautiful woman in the world and that she understood him like no other, but he had not uttered those words of love she now knew she craved.

It was an utter mess.

Keyes walked into the parlour. She sighed, staring at the butler.

“What is it?” she asked abruptly. She didn’t like being rude to the servants, who she loved, but she was in such a gloomy mood she could not help it.

“Mr. Arthur Cluett has called, My Lady,” said the butler slowly. “Shall I take him to the drawing-room?”

Isabella stared at the butler in shock. The nerve of the man! After she had dismissed him so soundly yesterday, he had the gall to call upon her again like nothing had happened. Without a note, which she had specified he must do. All of her fears that he was going to be bull-headed about this were obviously real.

She stood up. “No, Keyes. Is he in the foyer?”

The butler nodded. “Yes, My Lady.”

She nodded. “Good. I shall speak to Mr. Cluett there.” She took a deep, ragged breath. “He shan’t be staying long, Keyes. There is no need to order the tea service.”

The butler raised an eyebrow. “Very good, My Lady.”

She was filled with a furious anger. She was going to give Mr. Arthur Cluett a piece of her mind and she no longer cared who she offended in the process. The whole world be damned. She was no meek, mild lady who could be pushed around like this and bullied into submission. It was high time Arthur Cluett understood that, once and for all.

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He was standing in the foyer, studying the painting to the left of the door. A tall, angular, pedantic looking man, with his sleek oiled hair and pince-nez resting upon the bridge of his nose. Isabella suppressed a shudder of distaste.

“Mr. Cluett,” she called, walking up to him. “It surprises me to see you here after our conversation yesterday. I thought I made my feelings about courting you perfectly clear.” She paused, raising her chin. “And also that a note is always polite. I do not like cold calls.”

He smiled slightly, his eyes blatant, roaming over her. Assessing her as if she were something he had just spotted in a shop and was thinking of purchasing. A particular look that she had seen upon his face before, and it always infuriated her. It held contempt as well as desire.

“I was simply passing by, Lady Isabella,” he said in that patronising way he had. “I did not think it much inconvenience to stop by and see if you were receptive to a call.” He paused. “I thought you would probably be regretting your rash words from yesterday. A lady always does, when she has time to consider, after all.”

She glared at him, her hands balling into tight fists by her side. The insufferable prig. Telling her that she did not know her own mind! That she could not articulate her own feelings!

“I am not regretting those words,” she said, raising her chin higher. “If anything, expressing my feelings has solidified my resolve on the matter.” She took a deep breath. “And now, I must ask you to leave, Mr. Cluett. I do hope you understand.”

His eyes flashed with anger. He gaped at her, obviously not believing she was daring to refuse him entry to her home.

“I am going nowhere, Lady Isabella,” he said, raising his voice. “Your father would be appalled, I am sure, to hear how rude you are being to the nephew of his dear friend. He would insist that you act properly and receive me...”

“How dare you?” she cried, her chest rising and falling in distress. “How *dare* you say such a thing to me! This is *my* home, and I do not wish to receive you, Mr. Cluett! I cannot make my wishes any clearer to you!”

Keyes walked into the foyer, frowning. He had obviously heard their raised voices. He looked unsure, his head swivelling from Isabella to Arthur Cluett. Lizzie, the parlour maid, was also lurking behind a potted plant, looking astonished. This would be gossip fodder indeed in the servant’s quarters, thought Isabella darkly.

And she simply didn’t care at all.

Suddenly, there was a clattering of footsteps down the staircase. It was her father, rushing towards them, his face distressed. He stopped, staring at them both.

“What is going on here?” he asked. “I heard raised voices from my study.”

Isabella furiously rounded on her father. “Tell him, Papa,” she cried, trying to hold back the tears. “Tell him that I do not want him to call upon me! Not now and not ever! I refuse to entertain him!”

“Isabella,” soothed her father, taking her hand, which she was appalled to find was shaking. “You are distraught, my dear. Please, go and sit in the parlour and calm yourself. I shall deal with Mr. Cluett.”

She took a deep breath, drawing herself up to her full height. “Very well, Papa. But please, you must tell him how I feel. I shall not see him again.”

“Of course, dearest,” he said, stroking her hand. “I shall talk to Mr. Cluett. Go now. We do not want the whole household in turmoil with this.”

She nodded. Stiffly, she walked away, feeling as jerky as a marionette. She would not look back at Arthur Cluett. She didn’t want to give the man the satisfaction.

When she reached the parlour, she collapsed into a chair near the fire, shaking uncontrollably. Her head was reeling.

She could hear her father talking in a calm voice to the man who was responding in the same way. Papa obviously did not want to confront him outright but was trying to get him to see reason logically. That was his way. Papa was not a man given to histrionics. She had hardly ever heard him raise his voice at all.

She stared into the fire, shaking her head in shock. That it had come to this.

She had tried so very hard to be direct with Arthur Cluett, but the man simply would not listen to her. And then, he had infuriated her further with his intractable stance upon the subject. He had given her no choice. It appalled her to be so blatantly rude, but he had forced her into a corner, well and truly.

Suddenly, she heard a horsethundering up the driveway. Curious, she got up, gazing out the window.

Her heart seized. It was Jasper, a bundle of swords strapped to the back of his horse. The new swords her father had ordered were obviously done. He was delivering them.

Her eyes filled with helpless tears again. How she wanted to rush out and greet him, throw herself into his arms, and sob onto his shoulder. Tell him everything that had just happened. But how could she? People would see it. They would know instantly that there was something between her and the blacksmith's son.

She would be ruined. She would ruin both their lives.

She shrank back, returning to her seat. She put her head into her hands. She didn't know what to do about any of it. She didn't think she had ever been more confused in her life.

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The sky had mostly cleared, and there was only a spattering of rain. Isabella waited at the side of the house, breathing a sigh of relief as she watched Mr. Cluett's carriage leaving Highbury. She knew that Papa had taken Jasper to the sword room with his delivery. He would surely be leaving the house at any moment.

And here he was, a distracted expression upon his face as he walked towards the stables to retrieve his horse.

"Jasper," she called in a loud whisper. "Over here."

He jumped slightly, turning towards her voice. His face transformed with joy at the sight of her. Her heart started to beat frantically. It was that look, more than anything, which told her what she wanted to know. What she needed to know. He wasn't angry with her. The powerful feelings between them were as strong as ever.

He walked slowly over to her, his eyes roaming over her. His gaze was full of tenderness as well as suppressed desire. Such a contrast to the possessive, slightly contemptuous look Arthur Cluett always gave her.

Jasper desired her for who she truly was. She wasn't just a desirable



possession to him. She gloried in it, gazing up at him in adoration.

“Can you meet me at the hut?” she said breathlessly.

He hesitated, glancing left and right to see if anyone was around. She held her breath. He was obviously torn, wanting to do the right thing. Or what society thought was the right thing, she thought contemptuously. But eventually, he nodded.

“Are you alright?” he asked, frowning slightly. “You seem upset.”

She took a deep breath. “I will tell you why at the hut. There is no time now.” She paused. “I have missed you. So much.”

His face flushed. “I have missed you, too. It seems ridiculous. We only saw each other yesterday...”

Her heart flipped over in her chest. He missed her as much as she missed him!

“The hut,” she breathed, her eyes glittering. “I shall leave ten minutes after you do.” She glanced up at the sky. “I do not think there will be heavy rain, after all. No one will question me that I wish to take a ride by myself.”

He nodded before quickly walking away towards the stables.

She didn't linger. Quickly, she walked back into the house. She would change into her riding habit now. By the time she was done, he would be almost at the hut. No one would put two and two together and link the departure of the blacksmith's son to her desire to go for a ride.

A heavy sorrow entered her heart. She fervently wished she did not have to sneak around like this to see him. How she wished they could be open about their feelings.

She took a deep breath. It was what it was, and they had no choice.

She pushed the sorrow away. She was seeing him again, and that was all that mattered.

## Chapter 19

The sky had almost entirely cleared by the time Isabella got to the hut. She glanced around. Jasper's horse was tethered to a tree, but he was nowhere in sight. Suddenly, she noticed wisps of smoke leaving the small chimney. He was obviously already inside and had even lit a fire.

She dismounted, tying Sooky to another tree. She had told Papa of her intention to go for a ride. He had seemed surprised that she hadn't wanted to discuss the incident with Mr. Cluett, but she simply did not have time. It could wait until later. She would be very interested to hear how the gentleman had taken the final rejection from her father's lips.

She walked towards the hut, breathing a sigh of relief. At least Arthur Cluett was dealt with once and for all. There was simply no way that her father would allow the man to call upon her again. Papa had seen how distressed she was.

She pushed open the door. Jasper was sitting by the fire, fanning the flames. He watched her enter, taking off her gloves and riding hat, placing them on a side table.

"I was not sure if you would make it," he said slowly.

She smiled faintly. "It would take hell and highwater to stop me," she said grimly. "Especially after the morning I have had."

He gazed at her steadily. "Tell me."

She sighed, sitting down opposite him. She wanted to rush into his arms but restrained herself. She wanted to tell him about Arthur Cluett so that he could truly understand what she was up against. That it wasn't all sunshine and roses in her privileged world. There was a price to pay for being born a high-class lady.

"I had an altercation with a gentleman," she said in clipped tones. "A gentleman who has decided he admires me and wishes to court me."

His face darkened. He gazed into the fire, struggling with some deep emotion but he didn't say a thing.

She took a deep breath. "His name is Arthur Cluett," she continued, shuddering with distaste at the thought of him. "He is the nephew of a close acquaintance of my father. He has started calling upon me..."

"I think I saw you taking a walk with him," he said slowly, turning to face her. "A tall, thin man who looks like he is held up with a stiff poker?"

She burst out laughing at that. "Yes. That is him, alright." She took another deep breath. "Anyway, I told him outright yesterday that I am not interested and never will be. He refused to listen to me, telling me I did not know my own mind. And when he called again today, as if I had never even spoken, well, I lost my temper..."

He grinned suddenly. "I would have liked to see that."

She grinned back. He was making her feel better about the whole thing already. Just as she had known he would.

“I yelled at him in the foyer,” she continued. “I told him that he must never call upon me again – that I would refuse to see him. He told me that I was being impossibly rude and that my father would have something to say about that.” She glowered. “The man is simply intolerable. But Papa interceded and has told him to stay away. It is finally done.”

Jasper reached out, taking her hand. “I am sorry you had to go through that. I could tell just by looking at him that he is the type that likes to have everything his own way and does not take no for an answer.”

Isabella nodded. “That is his character, indeed. An insufferable man! I cannot endure him at all.” She shuddered in distaste again. “This is what you must understand about my world, Jasper. Arthur Cluett is rather extreme, but most gentlemen of my class think like him. They think that women are only objects which they must possess. They do not listen to a lady. To them, a woman has no mind of her own. She must cower to a man.”

He nodded. “It is the same in my class, Isabella. I think it is the same for women everywhere. But it distresses me that this man has upset you so much.” He gazed at her steadily. “I would never treat you like that. I love your wild spirit and would never try to tame it.”

His words were like a soothing balm on her soul. She always knew that he didn’t think like other men. He would never suppress her nature. They were so alike. Both restless, adventurous free spirits who had found each other against the odds.

"I know I should not say it," he continued hesitantly. "But my heart leapt to hear that you rejected the gentleman. That there is no one else you are partial to." He sighed deeply, looking pained. "I cannot help my feelings. I know that I should encourage you to pursue a gentleman of your class, but the mere thought of you in another man's arms makes my blood boil. I do not know how I could endure it..."

Her heart lurched. She had been hoping he would say something like that. That he would not just sit there and reiterate that she must try to court a gentleman, even if Arthur Cluett had been an abysmal failure in that regard. That he would tell her that he could not endure the thought of her with another man.

She stared into his eyes. "I cannot bear the thought of you with another woman either," she said slowly. "The thought tears my heart." She hesitated. "Is there anyone in your village who might become your sweetheart?"

He grinned suddenly. "No, Isabella. I have told you that before." He paused. "There is a girl who is a close family friend. She delivers our meals every night, which her mother kindly makes for us, ever since my mother died...I know she thinks of me in that way, but she is like a sister to me...I do not wish to hurt her, but I think there might be no help for it."

He bowed his head. Her heart lurched again with pity. It was almost as if she could see the struggle within him – towards duty, towards a life that had been preordained for him, towards a life with a local village girl. A life that he did not want.

And she did not want the life that had been preordained for her,

either. She did not want to marry a gentleman who would treat her as his possession and never let her speak. She did not want to be the lady of the manor, living a dull, constrained life, doing embroidery patches, only thinking of her husband's needs.

She wanted it all. She wanted a life filled with adventure.

And she wanted Jasper as part of it.

"Is it possible..." she whispered, her heart fluttering with wild hope. "Is it possible for us to have a life together..."

He looked pained. "Isabella, we must not speak of it," he said fiercely. "It fills me with longing. A yearning that can never be fulfilled. The best thing we can do is accept it. You would hate to leave your family, and you must realise they could never acknowledge you again if we ran away. You would lose them forever."

She blinked back furious tears. She didn't want to hear this. But the thought of losing Papa and Nathaniel was too much to endure.

"My father would disown me, too," he continued sadly. "He is a conventional man. He would never understand what is between us. To him, it would just appear that I have forgotten my place." He hesitated. "He is getting older, and his health is fading. I do not know how many years he has left. I could never forgive myself if we became as strangers to each other."

She was silent for a moment. "I understand," she said, an awful pain tearing at her heart. "I truly do, Jasper. What are we to do?"

He swore underneath his breath, grabbing her and pulling her into his arms. She nestled against him, hearing the soft thud of his heart in his chest. There was no solution to any of it, but they had this moment at least. They were here in each other's arms, and the whole world suddenly diminished.

Tenderly, he stroked her hair, then her face, his hands drifting over her neck. Her head tilted back in rapture, and she closed her eyes. He groaned, his hands drifting lower over her breasts. She let out a hiss as his hands found her nipples, tweaking them into hard peaks beneath the bodice of her gown.

"Oh, it is madness," she whispered, her head lolling as those sweet sensations sprang to life within her. "How is it that you do this to me every time? It is as if I exist simply for your touch."

He sighed deeply, but he didn't stop. "You do the same thing to me, you know. So much."

They became silent, intent on each other. And then, he slipped a hand underneath her gown, fumbling for a moment, before he found the very core of her.

She jerked as his cold fingers found her hot flesh, caressing in bold strokes, over and over. She felt as slippery as an eel. He sighed tremulously before sliding a finger inside her plundering her depths. She arched her back, trembling with need as those wild, sweet sensations leapt to life, growing stronger and brighter with every second.



He was staring into her eyes as he caressed her, watching her face intently. She struggled to contain the emotion; she felt suddenly vulnerable that he was watching her in such abandon.

But then she gave a strangled cry as a hot flush leapt over her flesh. She didn't care any longer. She wanted him to see her face in this intimate moment. She wanted him to watch her as she climbed towards that peak, to see what he was doing to her. It was all for him after all. He had created this ecstasy within her, and he should share it.

Suddenly, she stiffened, crying out. The peak crashed over her, wave after wave of intensely euphoric sensation. It was so beautiful she almost couldn't bear it. His other hand gripped her tightly around the waist as she rode it out. He didn't stop caressing her until she slumped against him, completely spent.

He kissed her lightly on the hair. "I didn't think you could be more beautiful," he whispered. "But in that moment, when your pleasure was upon you, it was as if some light had entered your soul. It was simply the most exquisite thing I have ever seen in my life."

She was shaking, gripping him tightly. She couldn't say a word. The pleasure had been so strong it was almost overwhelming. She felt as if she might suddenly swoon.

She rested her head against his chest, squeezing her eyes shut.

She loved him. She knew it for certain now, deep in her soul.

She would love him forever, and she could never love another.

But she didn't say a word. She simply let him hold her. Words seemed unnecessary in this space, in the closeness between them. Besides, if she uttered those words, how would he react? Would he stiffen, pushing her away, telling her that it was hopeless, and she must quell it?

She took a deep, shuddering breath. It was enough to be in this moment with him. It must be enough. For she knew, with a feeling of deep bittersweet sorrow, that there would never be anything else for them in this life.

She loved him...but eventually, she must let him go.

## Chapter 20

The next day, Isabella stared dreamily out the parlour window, thinking about Jasper. It was as if she was still tingling all over from their encounter in the hut the previous day. Flashes of memory consumed her, so vivid that it was almost as if she were still lying in his arms, and he was bringing her to that ultimate peak of pleasure again.

She jumped guiltily when her father entered the room. She didn't know why. It wasn't as if he knew what she was thinking about. Hastily, she stood up, facing him, trying to ignore the blush that heated her face.

"There you are," he said. "I think that we need to talk, Isabella."

She blanched. Her first instinct was that he knew about her and Jasper. But how?

"You do not need to look so alarmed, my dear," he said, settling on a chair by the fire. "I just thought we should speak about Mr. Cluett and the incident yesterday. I do not blame you for it at all." He paused. "Sit down, Isabella."

She did as he bid, sitting opposite him. She should have realised this was coming, but in her rapture over Jasper and what had happened in the hut, she had almost forgotten about Arthur Cluett entirely. She and her father hadn't had a chance to speak privately about it yet. She had retired to her room in a lovesick stupor for the rest of the day yesterday, claiming she was ill.

“Are you feeling better?” the Duke asked, staring at her with concern. “Did you take to your bed yesterday because of the incident? I did not think you were truly ill.”

Isabella took a deep breath. “It is quite alright, Papa. But do tell me how Mr. Cluett was when you spoke to him. I am most interested to hear it.”

Her father grimaced slightly. “Mr. Cluett is, as you have said, a singular gentleman,” he said slowly. “He took some careful handling. He acted in a very high-handed way with me, almost seeking me as an ally against you. He intimated that you are just a silly young lady who cannot know her own mind and needs to be managed.”

The anger leapt to life in Isabella again. How dare he? Who did he think he was?

The Duke took a deep breath. “I only just managed to hold my temper,” he said. “I had to bite my tongue a few times. I repeatedly told him that you have a sound mind and are quite capable of making up your own mind on the matter. I told him I would never push you into something you did not want.”

“What did he say?” asked Isabella. She didn’t think she could loathe Arthur Cluett any more than she already did, but it seemed it indeed was possible.

Her father shook his head. “He wasn’t happy, but he accepted it eventually,” he said. “I was rather angry that he did not apologise for his high-handed behaviour, but at least he seems to have made his

peace with the fact you are not interested in him and never will be. That is something.”

Isabella nodded. She just wanted Arthur Cluett out of her life completely. She didn't want to see his face ever again. The man had not acted respectfully towards her father, which angered her, but if he stayed away, then she would let the matter lie.

“Thank you, Papa,” she said, her eyes glittering with tears. “And I am so sorry for losing my temper with him. I was just so terribly frustrated when he refused to listen to me. It was as if I was talking to a wall.”

The Duke sighed heavily. “He is an obstinate young man indeed, Isabella. Quite determined to get his own way.” He paused. “But then, I suppose I should not be surprised. He was spoilt entirely by his widowed mother after his father passed away. He is used to ruling the roost at home, and Mrs. Cluett is a rather meek thing. I think she has never dared to stand up to him.”

Isabella nodded. “They were left in a precarious position when his father passed, were they not?”

The Duke nodded. “Indeed. The estate is theirs for life, but they only have a meagre annual income, I believe.” He took a deep breath. “Arthur really should be seeking work to supplement it, but he is lazy as well as stubborn. He thinks it would be beneath him to seek gainful employment to support himself and his mother, or so his uncle has told me.”

Isabella was suddenly struck by a thought which should have occurred to her before. “Do you think he was so doggedly pursuing me because

of my dowry? As a means to solve his financial woes?"

The Duke looked pained. "I never want to believe that of people I know, but it is indeed possible, Isabella. I would not put it past the fellow. Although the lure of your charm and beauty might have also been just as attractive to him. Two for the price of one, as they say."

"What a thoroughly detestable man he is," said Isabella, wincing. "And it would explain why he was so angry with me for not even contemplating courting him. It meant that his hopes for a quick solution to his problems were dashed."

The Duke sighed again. "Well, he knows his attentions are not welcome now. We should have no further problem from him." His face suddenly darkened. "If he does come to Highbury acting in that way again, I shall not treat him so civilly. He may find himself on the end of the point of my sword."

Isabella laughed, gazing at her father fondly. For all his love of swords and swordplay, her father was not an aggressive man at all. She didn't think he had ever been in a serious duel in his life. It was all about the sport. The thought of her dear, mild Papa threatening Arthur Cluett with his sword was rather amusing.

"Hopefully it will not come to that, as you say," said Isabella. "I do not think he will dare. He just needed a man to tell him what he would not listen to from a lady." She exhaled slowly. "Let us forget about Arthur Cluett entirely."

"Here, here," said her father, his eyes twinkling. "A most unpleasant business, but it is done! What are your plans for the day, dearest?"

Isabella shrugged listlessly. She didn't want to do anything in particular. All she wanted was to be with Jasper again but she could hardly tell her father that.

"Oh, I do not know," she replied vaguely. "Perhaps I might go and visit Emily or Aunt Jemima. Get out of the house for a while. Would that be quite alright?"

"Of course, my dear," he said, rising to his feet and planting a soft kiss upon her head. "And now I must dash. I have a pressing appointment in Shrewsbury, and the carriage is waiting. You may take the secondary one if you decide to go out. Nathaniel has just received two new books by post and is ensconced in his room. I do not think we shall hear a peek out of him for the entire day."

Isabella laughed. "He will be as happy as a clam!"

Her father smiled. "Mr. Burnet is doing wonders for him, is he not? He is still as much a bookworm as ever but there is a sparkle in his eyes now that was never there before. And I have watched their lessons. Nathaniel is brimming with enthusiasm now." He paused. "Mr. Burnet is quite a fellow, isn't he? I am very fond of him."

Isabella swallowed a painful lump in her throat. "Yes, he seems a kind man. As well as a very good teacher."

"Well, I am away," said her father, rushing out of the room in his usual restless way.

Isabella stared after him. She loved him so very much. He was the kindest, sweetest father in the world. He never acted the grand duke with anyone. He always treated people with courtesy and kindness, if they were a prince or a pauper. She was so very lucky to have him. And Nathaniel.

Her eyes filled with tears again. Jasper was right. She couldn't bear to lose her family, but equally, how could she bear to lose him?

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An hour later, as she was just about to order the carriage to go for a visit to Emily's, Keyes walked into the room, carrying a note on a silver tray.

"This just arrived, My Lady," he said gravely, handing it to her.

"Thank you, Keyes," she said, staring down at the note. It didn't have a wax seal. Instead, it was a rough piece of parchment, simply folded in half.

The butler left. She opened it quickly, her heart leaping. It was from Jasper! The very first time he had ever dared to write to her. She admired his handwriting for a moment before she started to read.

*My dearest Isabella,*



*I am afire with desire for you and simply cannot wait. Will you meet me again at the shepherd's hut in the woods today? I shall be there at noon. I hope you can make it.*

*Yours,*

*Jasper*

She smiled, closing the note. Then, she walked to the fire, tossing the paper upon it. It blackened and crinkled before dissolving into ash. As much as she would have liked to have kept it, as a reminder of him, she knew it was dangerous. Better to burn it than incriminate them.

Her heart leapt with delight. He wanted to see her again. He couldn't wait. A thrill went through her at the very thought of lying in his arms again. And she didn't even have to give an excuse to her father. He was out of the manor for the day, and she had already told him that she might visit Emily or Aunt Jemima. If he returned before she did, he would just assume she was at either place.

Another thrill tore through her. They could take longer. She wouldn't have to rush back.

Isabella stared at the clock on the mantel. It was already eleven. She must change and be on her way.

She tore up the staircase, her heart pounding with anticipation. Within ten minutes, she was on Sooky, heading into the woods.

She gazed around at the day, feeling such euphoric joy she felt as if her heart might burst. There was a soft breeze lifting the leaves in the trees. A hare darted across her path, leaping from its burrow. There were bluebells and primroses and so many other flowers blooming with abandon. It was a truly wondrous sight.

She was seeing Jasper again. Arthur Cluett had been dealt with. All was well with the world.

She sighed, leading Sooky deeper into the woods. She knew that her pain was still waiting for her. She must end it with Jasper eventually, but she didn't want to think about it now. All she wanted was to be with him, pretending as if they were the only two people in the world. Lying in each other's arms...loving each other.

She hadn't expected this today at all. A most blissfully unexpected joy.

Eventually, she led Sooky through the clearing towards the hut. Her heart leapt. It was as if it was *their* place now; their very own love nest. She would always treasure it.

There was a different horse to the one Jasper usually rode tethered to a tree. A speckled stallion, by the look of the beast. She dismounted, tethering Sooky next to it. Perhaps the horse belonged to Jasper's father.

She pushed open the door to the hut.

"I am here," she whispered, blinking to accustom her eyes to the

sudden darkness.

A figure emerged from the shadows. A cold shiver ran down her spine.

It wasn't Jasper. It was another man entirely.

## Chapter 21

Isabella gaped. The figure emerging from the shadows was Arthur Cluett. His face looked more gaunt than usual, almost haunted. And his eyes were filled with a feverish light that she had never seen before.

“What...what are you doing here?” she stammered, so bewildered by this strange turn of events that she couldn’t think properly.

He smiled slowly. There was a strange smell emanating from him. It took her a minute to realise it was the smell of strong liquor, perhaps whiskey. She reeled back, utterly repulsed. Was that the reason he was acting even more strangely than he normally did? Had he *followed* her here?

She blinked in utter confusion. All she could think was how she was going to get away from him. Jasper was sure to be here at any moment, and she did not know what would happen when he discovered Arthur in here with her.

He took a deep breath, swaying slightly on his feet. But she realised that although he had obviously been drinking, he still had his faculties about him. He wasn’t so in his cups that he could be pushed over. Instead, it had sharpened him, giving him a slightly manic air.

“I know,” he said, his voice thick. “I know what you have been up to, Lady Isabella Finch. You naughty girl.” He gazed at her steadily. “I followed you to this hut yesterday, and I know who you met in here and what you were doing.”

Her heart froze in utter terror, and her mind started spinning violently. The worst possible thing in the world had happened. She and Jasper had been discovered. By Arthur Cluett, of all people.

Desperately, she tried to get her mind to work, to figure out how she could salvage this appalling situation. She could deny it outright – tell him he was insane and flounce out of the hut. Or she could plead with him. There probably weren't any other options at this point at all.

She slowly started backing up until she was against the wall. He was advancing upon her in an almost menacing way, like a spider moving towards a fly in the centre of its web. Another wave of horror swept over her.

"Please," she said, forcing a smile onto her face. Her mouth was so dry she could barely talk. "Jasper and I are just good friends...I know it is unconventional, but we mean no harm..."

He gave a short, sharp laugh. "There is only one reason that a lady and a low-born man would meet secretly in a hut in the middle of the woods, and it has nothing to do with good conversation." He paused. "You are playing the whore, Isabella. With someone who is not fit to wipe your boots. I am rather disappointed."

She flushed. "How dare you speak to me like that! You know nothing of what the relationship is between Jasper and me!" She took a deep breath. "And he will be here soon. When he pushes open that door, he will be very angry, seeing me bailed up like this by you! I would be very careful, Mr. Cluett."

He stared at her for a moment before bursting into raucous laughter. He grabbed his sides, rocking back and forth in hilarity. She gaped at him, stunned.

“Oh, you still do not realise, do you,” he said when he caught his breath. “Your blacksmith paramour is not coming here today. He never was, my dear.” He slowly smiled. “It was *me* who wrote the note on his behalf, asking you to come here today! I fooled you good and proper, did I not?”

“What?” she stammered.

His smile broadened. “Yes, it was rather clever of me, was it not? After your appalling unladylike display in the foyer at Highbury, I knew that you would never agree to meet me. But if the note came from your lover...”

“Jasper is not coming here?” she asked, gazing back at the door.

She knew now that she must try to get out of here and away from him as quickly as possible. He had forged a note to get her here, and he was looking more crazed than ever. She was in a very vulnerable position, and she didn’t even have a sword on her to defend herself.

He shook his head slowly. “I have no idea where your paramour even is. Probably in the blacksmith shop, toiling away, I would suppose.” He wrinkled his nose. “Truly Isabella, what dreadful taste you have! A *blacksmith*! Your father would have an apoplexy if he found out, and I would hardly blame him.”

She reddened. "He does not have to find out anything, Mr. Cluett. This can stay between us. I know that you are enjoying lording it over me, making me feel small. Have your fun. But do not say anything to my father. I beseech you."

He laughed nastily, advancing upon her. "Oh, I have no intention of telling your father. Not unless I must." He looked her up and down in an insolent way. "You see, I have other plans for you, Lady Isabella. And you shall do exactly what I say, or else your low-born lover shall suffer the consequences."

"What?" Her voice was shaking. "I do not understand."

"Of course you do not," he said, wagging his finger at her. "I have not explained myself entirely. Shall I do so?"

Her heart was slamming in her chest now, and a sick dread filled her stomach. Surreptitiously, she eyed the door. If she was very quick and distracted him, she could be out of here and on Sooky before he could even react.

"Please do," she said. If she kept him talking, he might not notice her edging towards the door.

He smiled. "I want you to marry me, Lady Isabella. Of course, you already know that. I tried to do it in a conventional way, by wooing you and courting you and all that boring rigmarole." He rolled his eyes. "Yes, I found it as insufferable as you did, but it was a means to an end. But you refused to play ball."

“I am sorry,” she whispered, moving slightly. “I did not mean to offend you.”

He laughed outright. “You did not care if you offended me at all. You are a shrew, Isabella. A loud-mouthed, opinionated harpy who has been spoilt and indulged by a weak father.” He paused, eyeing her shrewdly. “I do not care for ladies such as yourself, even if you do have a certain golden beauty about you. It was always about your wealth...but I am sure that you have suspected that already.”

Isabella swallowed a lump in her throat, staring at him. He was almost rambling. She didn’t know why she hadn’t suspected before, but it rather seemed like Arthur Cluett was not in his right mind. Perhaps he never had been. It wasn’t just the smell of liquor upon him. It was much more than that.

“You cast me off,” he continued, curling his lip. “To frolic with a blacksmith! That action alone exposes you for the shrewish whore you are...it will be a very great pleasure to tame such a woman as you... but I digress.”

He suddenly gave her a brilliant smile. “You see, I still intend to marry you, Isabella. I must. My income is so reduced as to be a pittance, and the only way to increase it is to make an advantageous marriage. And I am tired of trawling the district trying to find eligible heiresses with substantial dowries. I am bored with the whole business. I choose *you*.”

“I told you I am not interested, Mr. Cluett,” she said desperately. “We have already been over this. My father has reiterated my position to you. I shall not marry you!”



“Ah, but you will, my dear,” he said, his eyes bulging. “I am going to make you marry me. It is no longer your choice. I am taking it quite out of your hands.”

She glared at him, so shocked, she didn't know what to say. How had she never realised before – he *was* mad. He was stone-cold insane. He belonged in Bedlam or some other asylum.

“I am going to take you to my home,” he said in a calm voice, as if he was inviting her for afternoon tea. “This very evening, I intend to bundle you into a carriage to head to Scotland. When we get there, we shall marry over the blacksmith's anvil. By tomorrow you will no longer be Lady Isabella Finch but Mrs. Arthur Cluett.”

She stared at him in horror. “I shall do no such thing! You are insane, sir! And I shall not listen to another word of your gibberish.” She raised her chin. “Stand aside. I demand it.”

He slowly started to laugh. “I am not letting you go anywhere, Isabella. I went to all the trouble of pretending to be your lover to lure you here. Now, you are mine. We are going to my house, and that is that.”

Calmly, he reached into his jacket pocket, taking out a pistol and pointing it at her head.

She almost fainted with fright. She only just managed to stop her knees buckling entirely and sliding down the wall.

This was so much worse than she had imagined. This was a hundred

times worse. For not only was he insane, but he also had a pistol. He was insisting that he was going to marry her, and it was to happen immediately. A flying trip to elope in Scotland. He intended to force her to his home at gunpoint and spirit her away against her will.

He was abducting her.

“Mr. Cluett,” she breathed, sweat dripping down her neck. “Please, I beg you to reconsider this vile plan. It cannot work. You must know that.” She took a deep breath. “My father knows my feelings towards you. He heard our altercation in the foyer at my home yesterday morning. There is simply no way he will believe that I willingly consented to run away with you to marry.”

He smiled nastily. “I have thought of that! I propose that as soon as we are back at my home, you shall write your father a note, explaining that you have had a very sudden but pleasant change of heart about me and are intending to marry me immediately. Your father shall accept it...and if he does not, it shall be too late, in any case. We shall be on the road to Gretna Green, and there is nothing he can do about it.”

Her heart almost jumped out of her chest. “He will never believe it! He knows my feelings towards you!” Her breath was coming in short, sharp gasps. “And besides, Jasper is aware of them as well. I told him of our ugly altercation. He knows that I cannot stand you and would never willingly run away with you!”

He sighed contemptuously. “My dear, you do not seem to understand. By the time your dear Jasper realises what has happened, it will be far too late. You shall be my wife by tomorrow at the latest. Once that ring is on your finger, you are mine, Isabella. Half of what is due to you is in my hands.” He laughed unpleasantly. “I do not give a whit what happens afterwards. You can wring your hands and turn into

Lady Macbeth for all I care. But you shall be my wife. I shall own you, body and soul.”

She shrank back further into the wall. This was a nightmare. Surely, she must wake up from it soon.

But as he led her at gunpoint out of the hut, forcing her to mount Sooky and ride towards his home with him, she knew that it wasn't.

This was real. And she might never see her beloved home – or Jasper – again.

## Chapter 22

Jasper urged his horse over the hill, staring ahead. His heart was thumping hard in his chest. There it stood. Highbury Manor.

He narrowed his eyes, trying to locate Isabella's bedroom window. The one that she had gazed out at him from before he had even met her. It had been her standing there that day, watching him leave Highbury after he had delivered those swords to her father. She had noticed him from the very beginning.

He shifted in the saddle, his heart still thumping hard. He didn't know why he was here – he should be hard at work in the blacksmith's shop. They had made no promises to each other when they had left each other yesterday as to when they would see each other again. And last night he had been convinced that he must put a stop to the whole thing. He knew now that they were only going to break each other's hearts and make the business of living beyond each other so much harder.

And yet, here he was, watching her home, like a lovesick fool.

He should turn the horse around and just go back to Collstock.

He sighed heavily. He couldn't. He just couldn't turn the horse around. He needed to see her, even if it was only briefly. He would ride there and knock on the door, make some excuse that he needed to see the Duke about Nathaniel's progress. She would see him and find a way to talk to him. He just knew it.

He was afire. The blood was pounding in his veins, with such a fierce desire that it was impossible to ignore. He must see her.

He pushed the horse onwards, down the hill, galloping like the wind towards the manor. A slow realisation was dawning upon him. Something that he had been trying to fight desperately. Something that bode no good for either of them.

He was in love with her. Hopelessly, fiercely, completely.

He urged the horse onwards. His love was destined to die a terrible death. They could never be together. They must renounce each other. The pain when that time came was going to be immense.

And still, he could not stop.

*Isabella*, he thought.

Her name was in his mind, his heart, his very soul. It was like a drumbeat in his veins. She had invaded him as if he had immersed himself in high water and was drowning within the glorious depths.

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Jasper's heart was still thumping when he rapped on the grand front door. There were heavy footsteps, and then it swung open. He was staring into the face of the butler.

He took a deep breath. "I apologise for the intrusion," he said quickly. "But is the Duke at home and able to see me, by any chance?"

The butler frowned slightly. He looked troubled. Jasper thought he was about to deny him entry when there was a noise behind the man. It was the Duke standing there, his chest rising and falling. He looked dishevelled and distressed – not his usual jocular, smiling self. He was clutching a letter tightly in one hand.

He didn't think. He simply brushed past the butler, approaching the Duke.

"Your Grace," he said, frowning deeply. "What is it? Have you had bad news?"

The Duke stared at him vaguely. "Oh, it is you, Mr. Burnet," he breathed. "I heard a knock at the door and was hoping, quite against hope, that it might be someone to tell me that this is all a bad dream..."

Jasper gaped at him. "You have had bad news then?"

The Duke looked like he was about to be ill. His face was a pasty colour, almost ashen. He bit his lip, looking agonised. He didn't seem to know what to do.

Jasper took his arm. "Let us go to your study, Your Grace. I will pour

you a brandy. You can tell me everything, and I shall see if I can help.”

The Duke looked gratefully, nodding quickly. “Yes, Mr. Burnet. A brandy. It shall help me think, for I cannot make head nor tail of it. At all.”

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They settled in the study. Jasper poured the Duke a large brandy, handing it to him. He took it gratefully, swigging half of it immediately, then started coughing. Jasper had to thump him on the back so that he could regain his breath.

The brandy seemed to be doing its job. A flush came into the man’s cheeks, and he sat forward, looking rather more alert than he had before. Jasper sat down beside him.

“Are you feeling better, Your Grace?” he asked in a gentle voice. “Truly, you must not overexert yourself. You might have an apoplexy.”

The Duke grimaced, swigging back the rest of the brandy. He placed the empty glass down. “I have received perplexing news,” he said slowly. “Most perplexing. I do not understand it at all.”

Jasper waited patiently. It was up to the Duke whether he wished to share it with him. He would not push the man.

The Duke held up the letter he was still clutching in his hand. “I received this only ten minutes prior to you knocking upon the door,” he whispered, his eyes glittering with tears. “It makes no sense to me, considering I know Isabella’s feelings about the gentleman. She was most insistent that she despised the man and would not have him as a suitor. They even had an altercation in the foyer yesterday morning...”

A dark foreboding came over Jasper. This was something to do with Isabella. And by the sounds of it, the gentleman she had told him about. The one who had been pursuing her and refusing to take no for an answer.

“What has happened?” he asked, more fiercely than he intended.

The Duke stared at him. Then he passed him the letter.

“Read it for yourself,” he said, his face twisting.

Jasper took the letter, opening it. He instantly recognised Isabella’s handwriting from the note she had sent him. He read quickly, the foreboding growing deeper with every line.

*Dearest Papa,*

*I know that this shall take you by surprise. I truly do not wish to hurt you, but I think it cannot be helped. I must do as my heart dictates.*



*I am afraid I have misled you about my feelings for Mr. Arthur Cluett. I was trying to fight what I truly felt for him, but it cannot be denied. We love each other and must be together immediately. We simply cannot wait.*

*I wish I could have told you this in person, but it has all happened so quickly it takes my breath away. We intend to marry straight away and shall soon be man and wife. Arthur is an honourable man, and it will all be legal. I would never disgrace you by running away without the assurance that I shall have a wedding ring upon my finger.*

*Please be happy for us. And please forgive me for doing this to you. I am compelled.*

*Your loving daughter,*

*Isabella*

Jasper swore underneath his breath. This was madness. He knew that Isabella would never do this. She despised Arthur Cluett. And yet, it was her handwriting. Not as neat and orderly as he remembered, though. It was scrawled, as if she were writing in a great hurry.

*Or under duress, he thought grimly.*

The Duke gazed at him helplessly. "What am I to do? I do not understand at all." He took a deep, ragged breath. "Isabella knows I would never stand in her way if she truly wants to marry the gentleman. I will even organise a quick wedding if that is what her heart desires. And yet she claims they must run away together and

elope! A gentleman that only yesterday she was claiming she could not stand and never wished to see again in her life!”

Jasper swore again. “Your Grace, it is a lie. You must realise that. When was the last time you saw her?”

The Duke frowned. “This morning. She claimed that she might go and visit her friend Emily or her aunt. I had a pressing appointment in Shrewsbury.” He paused. “When I returned, probably around two, she wasn’t here. I just assumed she was out visiting and thought little of it. And then...I received this letter.” He blinked back tears of distress. “And the worst of it is I just heard some very disturbing reports while I was in town about this man. Apparently he has been drinking heavily and behaving erratically for some time. I simply had no idea, or else I would never have allowed him to call at Highbury Manor to see Isabella...”

Jasper’s frown deepened. Something had obviously happened in those hours when the Duke was away from Highbury. He knew that Isabella would never willingly see the man again. She loathed him and hated the fact he would not listen to her when she had spurned him. And now, she was claiming they were so in love that they were running away to elope.

He opened the letter again. The very last line leapt out at him.

*Please be happy for us. And please forgive me for doing this to you. I am compelled.*

His heart filled with furious anger. There was her cry for help. The truth that she could not write openly.

*I am compelled.*

Arthur Cluett had forced her to write that letter. He had forced her to go away with him. Jasper had no idea how he had gotten to her, but he must find out.

“Have you spoken to your household as to what happened after you left this morning?” he barked.

The Duke looked surprised. “No.”

“I think you need to,” said Jasper grimly.

The Duke nodded. He reached across the desk for the bell. Within minutes, the butler walked through the door.

“Keyes, did the Lady Isabella tell you where she was going this morning?” he pressed. “Or did anything else happen?”

“Lady Isabella received a letter,” he said slowly. “Within an hour, she was out of the house and upon her horse. She said she was merely going for a ride within the woods.”

Jasper’s heart lurched violently. Isabella hadn’t gone out to visit anyone. She had headed into the woods on horseback after receiving a letter. And yet, why would she have agreed to meet Arthur Cluett in

the woods? It made no sense.

Unless Arthur Cluett had claimed to be someone else asking her to meet him.

His heart lurched again. He thought he had sensed someone following them back after they had left the hut yesterday, and yet, when he had looked back to check, there hadn't been anyone. It was obvious to him now that Arthur Cluett must have been following them. The man probably saw them go into the hut. The man knew that something was happening between them.

The man had lured her out of the house, pretending to be Jasper. It was the only thing that made any sense.

Which meant that wherever Isabella was, it was not through her own free will. The man had forced her to write that letter. And Isabella was in danger. Only a desperate madman would resort to such a tactic.

The butler bowed curtly, leaving the room. Jasper turned to the Duke, who still looked as mystified as ever.

"Your daughter does not wish to elope with the gentleman," said Jasper quickly. "She has written that letter under duress, Your Grace. I believe the man has taken her against her will."

"Dear Lord," cried the Duke, springing up, looking quite wild. "I must go to his house at once and retrieve her..."

Jasper put a restraining hand on his arm. "Let me do it. I promise I shall return her. You have my word."

The Duke looked unsure. "You would do that for us? For Isabella?"

"Upon my life," said Jasper grimly. "I shall return her safe and sound. I vow it." He took a deep, ragged breath. "You need to tell me where this Arthur Cluett lives. And I need one of your best swords, Your Grace. There is simply not a moment to lose."

## Chapter 23

Isabella sat on a chair, her hands tied behind her back tethered to it, in a small back room in Arthur Cluett's country home. He had taken her there immediately, the pistol concealed beneath his jacket. He had bundled her through the servant's entrance. She didn't think that his mother even knew she was in the house.

She took a deep, ragged breath. He had been as good as his word, forcing her to write a letter to her father, claiming that they were in love and planning to elope. The letter had been dispatched immediately. She couldn't bear to think of the pain her father must have gone through when he opened that letter and read those treacherous words.

Desperately, she tried to loosen the rope binding her, but it was impossible. And she was forced to admit to herself that even if she succeeded, the chances of her escaping this house without being seen were remote. Arthur Cluett had left her alone for the moment, but she knew she was being watched. There was probably a servant who had been paid extra to guard her, standing right outside the door.

Suddenly, she thought of his mother. Old Mrs. Cluett, who had indulged and coddled her only son. She was *somewhere* in this house. She must be. And she simply could not believe that the kind, gently spoken Mrs. Cluett would be letting this happen if she knew. She would be horrified.

Perhaps gaining Mrs. Cluett's attention was her only hope of escaping this nightmare.

“Mrs. Cluett!” she shouted in the loudest voice she could muster. “Mrs. Cluett! It is Lady Isabella Finch! I am being held hostage by your son! For the love of God, will you *please* help me!”

There was the sound of footsteps running down the hallway, and the door burst open. Arthur was standing there, staring at her, fuming.

“Shut your mouth,” he hissed, running towards her, his eyes glittering with a manic light. “My mother cannot help you, Isabella! She is not even in the house! She is staying with her sister in Shrewsbury. Do you truly think I would do this with her under the roof?”

Isabella’s heart sank. But she took a deep breath. He might be lying to her, after all. She would try again.

“Mrs. Cluett!” she screamed again. “I beseech you...”

He reached out a hand and slapped her hard across her face. She reeled back, so shocked that she could not speak for a moment. The slap stung, but the indignity of it was a far greater insult.

“I will *never* marry you,” she hissed, loathing him with every fibre of her being. “You can march me to the blacksmith’s anvil, but I shall never vow to love, honour and obey you! I would rather die!”

He bent down, glaring at her. “Oh, you will, Lady Isabella. You think you are so high and mighty, do you not? But I know your grubby little secret. If you refuse to marry me, then I vow I shall kill your lover. And destroy his father, as well. You do not want that, do you?”

She glared back at him. She wouldn't show how frightened she was. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"The carriage is almost ready," he said, straightening. "Within ten minutes, we shall be on the road towards Gretna Green, my dear. You can yell and writhe all you want, but it will still happen. I advise that you make your peace with it."

He reached out a hand, running it down the side of her face. She flinched. He laughed softly.

"You do not play the innocent maiden well, Isabella," he said slowly. "We both know you are no such thing. So why deny me when you are obviously a woman who likes to be touched by a man?"

"Not by you," she hissed, glaring at him. "Never by you."

"You will learn to like it," he said confidently. "I shall make you. You will be begging me after our wedding night, Isabella. I truly cannot wait to begin taming you. It shall be very satisfying to have you in my thrall. You are a beautiful woman, after all. I shall enjoy breaking your spirit."

She turned her face away, refusing to look at him. He was evil as well as mad. And the smell of liquor on his breath was stronger. It seemed to envelop him like a dark cloud. He had obviously been drinking more since they had gotten here. Suddenly, he reached behind her, roughly untying the rope that bound her hands to the chair.



“On your feet,” he ordered, taking out the pistol again. “We shall wait for the carriage at the back of the house so that no one passing sees you if they happen to be riding by.” When she refused to comply, he hauled her to her feet, pressing the pistol into the small of her back. “Start walking, Isabella. Now.”

He led her stumbling back through the house. She didn’t see a single soul, not even a maid. He must have told all the household servants to make themselves scarce. There was no one she could appeal to for help.

Her heart sank as they walked through the servant’s entrance at the back of the house. The carriage wasn’t here yet. But then she heard the sound of approaching wheels as it rounded the corner. It drew up alongside them. The driver stared down at them, his face impassive. Arthur must be paying the man handsomely to keep his mouth shut.

“Get in,” ordered Arthur, pushing her towards it.

She refused, fighting him the whole way. But eventually, he bundled her in. He was just about to climb into it after her when his face changed. He was looking into the distance, his face a mask of pure thunder.

“Well, well,” he muttered under his breath. “It seems you have a rescuer, Isabella.” He raised the pistol in his hand. “But I shall make short work of him.”

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Jasper drew the horse up at the front of the large country home, dismounting quickly. He was just about to run up the entrance steps when he noticed a carriage trotting towards the back of the house.

He unsheathed his sword, following it. Some deep instinct told him that he was just in time. That carriage was heading around the back of the house for a reason. Arthur Cluett was planning to get Isabella into it without anyone seeing from the front of the house, which was right near a main road into the next village.

*The cad. The unspeakable rogue. I am going to slice him into two pieces for daring to lay a hand on Isabella.*

His anger had been growing on the ride here. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that Isabella had been coerced into writing that letter. Why would she even have bothered to mention the man to him if she was secretly in love with Arthur Cluett and planning to do this? Besides, he knew deep within his heart that her feelings for him were genuine. She wanted to be with him, not Arthur Cluett.

He knew she was not lying to him. What they had was real.

He stopped abruptly. The carriage was there, just outside a small back door. And Arthur Cluett was advancing upon him with a pistol held high in his hand.

And then, he saw Isabella's face. She had stuck her head out the carriage window. Her eyes were huge and frightened. It was obvious that she was not in that carriage of her own free will. Her face was deathly white.

“Burnet,” said Arthur Cluett in a grim voice. “You surprise me. I hardly thought you would be chasing after her. I rather thought you would have taken your pleasure and been done with it.”

Jasper raised his sword. His heart was beating frantically.

“Put down your pistol, Cluett,” he called. “I am challenging you to a duel. I want to fight you like a man.”

The man sneered openly. “A duel? Only gentlemen duel. And *you* are no gentleman. You deserve to be shot like a dog.”

“Think you will not win?” taunted Jasper, raising his sword higher. “I am one of the best, Cluett. And I think you know it.”

The man glowered at him for a moment. Jasper saw the anger in his face. Arthur Cluett didn’t like that. Jasper waited, his heart in his mouth, to see what the man would do. He was taking a great risk. The man could just shoot him and be done with it, after all. Was he capable of cold-blooded murder?

But then, the man put his pistol away, unsheathing his sword. He brandished it in the air.

“Very well,” he called, his eyes glittering fiercely. “I shall duel you, Burnet. It shall be good practice...”

He didn't get to finish his sentence. Jasper was already lunging at him. The man was taken by surprise, jumping backwards. There was the clang of metal as their swords connected. They fought back and forth for a few minutes as Jasper sought the man's weak point. Everyone had one. It was just a matter of locating it.

Skilfully, little by little, he backed him into the wall of the house. He was just about to send the sword flying out of the man's hand when a figure suddenly jumped into the action ahead of him. A figure, seething with frenetic energy and anger, who also brandished a sword.

It was Isabella.

She lunged, the point of her sword pressing fiercely against the abductor's neck, just under his chin. Arthur Cluett was pinned to the wall like a dragonfly stabbed by a pin onto paper. His nostrils flared, and his eyes bulged, looking for all the world like a distressed horse.

"Drop it," she hissed. "Now. Or I shall not hesitate to cut you."

The man looked like he was going to refuse outright. Jasper held his breath. He didn't want Isabella to kill or harm the man in anyway, as much as he deserved it. And he could feel that she was just hanging onto her control. It could easily slip, and then Arthur Cluett would be lying on the ground.

"Do it," said Jasper. "She means what she says. You are defeated, Cluett."

The man's hand slowly opened, and the sword clattered to the ground. Quickly, Jasper retrieved it before frisking the man and taking the pistol. He and Isabella started backing away from him.

"I never want to see your face again," said Isabella, glaring at him. "And if I do, I shall tell the world what you did here today. You shall be arrested for an abductor. Do I make myself clear?"

The man nodded, turning deathly pale. "Yes, yes. Anything at all. Only do not tell my mother."

"You are pathetic," sneered Isabella. "Not even fit to wipe my shoes upon. Farewell, Arthur Cluett. And never forget that I shall make good on my promise if you push me."

The man nodded, looking like he was about to faint.

Jasper took Isabella's hand, leading her away to the front of the house. Within seconds, they were upon his horse, thundering through the front gates.

He felt her trembling with the aftermath of it all as he held her. His beautiful, brave woman who had jumped into the fray without a moment's thought and fought like the warrior that she was.

He didn't think he had ever loved her more than he did now. And he couldn't bear to think of how differently it might have gone. He might have lost her forever.

He held her tighter. They must get far away. But there was something he must tell her before he took her home. And it could not wait.

## Chapter 24

Jasper kept riding furiously, the horse thundering over the fields towards Highbury Manor. But at the junction, he suddenly turned left, heading into the woods.

Isabella didn't react at all to the abrupt change in the journey. She was sagging against his back, almost wilting. He knew that she was suffering the aftermath of what had happened to her – the sudden, complete draining of all her energy, physical and emotional.

She had been lured out of her home by Arthur Cluett, abducted, forced to write a fraudulent letter, and almost been taken to marry the man. And then she had fought like a tigress against him.

His heart twisted in sorrow for her. No wonder she was depleted.

He held her tighter, riding hard. It wasn't long before he spotted the clearing that told him where to go. There was no other place he had thought of taking her. The little hut was standing silent in the late afternoon sunshine. A few birds twittered in the trees around, but otherwise, it was theirs alone.

Tenderly, he took her off the horse, carrying her into the hut. She wound her arms around his neck, clinging to him. When they were inside, he settled her on the blankets, taking her hand and staring into her face.

“You are safe,” he whispered. “You are free.”

She shuddered quite violently. And then, tears were streaming down her face. He kept holding her hand as she quietly sobbed, releasing it all. He didn't speak. She needed to cry, and he didn't want to disturb her. All he did was softly stroke her hand.

When she gave a last hiccupping sob, turning silent, he stared deeply into her eyes.

"Tell me what happened," he said slowly. "I think I suspect, but you need to talk of it."

Isabella nodded, her face twisting. "Yes. I believe you are right." She took a deep, ragged breath. "A letter arrived at Highbury, claiming to be from you, asking me to meet you here. I had never seen your handwriting before and had no cause to doubt that it was truly you. I wanted to see you so much. And I had the opportunity. Papa was out for most of the day..."

Jasper nodded encouragingly, but inside, he was burning with fury. Arthur Cluett, for all his madness, had been calculating in the extreme. He knew that Isabella would not respond to a letter from him but would to one from Jasper. The only wild card in the deck of his plan was that Isabella was not familiar with Jasper's handwriting.

Isabella took another deep breath. "I never suspected for a moment it wasn't you. When I entered the hut, he emerged from the shadows, like a spider advancing towards its prey." She shuddered. "I could not understand what was going on at all. At that stage, I thought you were still coming. But it soon emerged what his evil plan was with me."



Jasper nodded again. "He followed us yesterday, didn't he? That is how he knew there is something between us. I had an instinct that we were being watched at one point."

Isabella exhaled slowly. "Yes. He knew. Hence the forged letter from you to lure me out." Her face twisted. "I thought him rude and abominable but never suspected how truly mad he is. And evil. He was quite frank with me that it was all about my dowry. He is in dire financial straits and needs to marry well, you see. And since he could not woo me, he decided to force me into it."

"The unspeakable cad," hissed Jasper, his face twisting in fury. He stared at Isabella hard. "Did he hurt you? Did he *touch* you?"

Isabella laughed shakily. "Only my pride, Jasper. He was rough with me, but he did not force himself upon me if that is what you are asking. He slapped me across the face at one point, but that was the extent of it." She shuddered violently. "Thank the Lord."

He swore softly. "I cannot bear the thought of what might have happened to you under his hands..."

She reached out, stroking his face slowly. "Hush. Nothing did in that regard." She gazed at him tenderly. "If it had not been for you, I would be on the road to Scotland now. He would have made me marry him. How did you even know anything about what was going on? How did you end up at his home searching for me?"

He smiled ruefully. "I visited Highbury in the hope of seeing you. I do not know why I did it; it was as if I was being pulled on a string towards you." He stared at her fiercely. "I think now it was a deep

instinct that you needed me. What else could it have been?"

Her eyes shone with tears again. A weight of emotion passed between them, so heavy with longing that it was almost unbearable.

"Your father was distressed," he continued, swallowing a painful lump in his throat. "He had received your letter and could not make any sense of it. He showed it to me, and I knew that it was all a lie. I convinced him to let me go and get you. I vowed to him that I would bring you safely home."

"My knight errand," she whispered, stroking his face anew.

He grinned. "You did not need saving, Isabella. You fought like a warrior in your own defence. I just gave you the opportunity."

She laughed softly. "I saw the sword on the top of the carriage as you were fighting him. What else was I to do? I never could resist the thought of a good fight. You know that."

He couldn't resist any longer. Feverishly he pulled her into his arms, kissing her frantically. Her hair, her face, her neck...anywhere that his lips could find her. She still smelt like the lavender water she had dabbed onto herself when she had dressed. Before the day had turned so dark.

"Isabella..." he whispered. He needed to tell her now. It was imperative. He couldn't wait another second. "I am in love with you. I think I have been in love with you from the very first moment I laid eyes upon you when you took off that fencing mask."

She stilled, gazing up at him with luminous eyes. “Yes. I am in love with you too, Jasper Burnet. Wildly and irretrievably. I just did not know how to tell you...I thought you would laugh at me and keep telling me that it was pointless to have such feelings when we can never be together.”

He shuddered with emotion. “What can we do?”

She gazed at him steadily. “I think we should be honest with Papa. Tell him what we mean to each other. At least then we are trying to be genuine.” Her face twisted. “I know that you are the son of a blacksmith, and I am the daughter of a duke. Nothing can ever change that. But Papa is a good man and wants me to be happy. I think it is worth the risk.”

He took a deep breath. The thought of telling the Duke of Coventry that he was in love with the man’s daughter was daunting. Isabella might say that her father only wanted her happiness, but he knew that their differing social statuses were an impassable gulf between them. Had any duke ever condoned such a union? He thought not.

But the Duke *was* a good man. Isabella wasn’t lying about that. And perhaps the fact Jasper had rescued Isabella from abduction might win points in his favour and show the Duke how serious he was about Isabella. Perhaps. They could only try.

“I think it is worth the risk as well,” he said slowly, his heart thudding painfully. “I am willing to do it. For my love for you is too strong to deny any longer. And I would rather be honest with your father, who I greatly admire, than skulk away with you behind his back. I want to try to win you honestly, Isabella. Show your father I am a suitor

worthy of you despite the fact I am not a gentleman.”

“But you are,” she insisted, lovingly stroking his face again. “You are one of nature’s true gentlemen. The gentlest man I have ever known.”

His heart flipped over in his chest. How he loved her. He saw now that he had been a coward. She was worth fighting for. She was worth everything. Even the disapproval and censure of his own father, who he was sure would never understand.

None of it mattered anymore. The only thing he could see was Isabella.

They kissed, long and languorously. It felt as if the kiss was sealing their newly confessed love and their commitment to each other. The kiss was an intention and a promise. They were both willing to fight for their love at long last. It was as if the sky had suddenly cleared after black clouds.

They fell back onto the blankets, the kiss deepening. His hands were hungry, exploring her every curve and crevasse. The beautiful landscape of her body was dearer to him than his own.

She sighed with pleasure, opening her mouth beneath his. He felt the intense longing within her that matched his own. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

His mouth left hers, trailing down her neck, nipping her skin. She laughed softly with delight, pressing herself against him. He bent lower, seeking her breasts. He needed to feel them. It was a deep

hunger that was rapidly starting to overwhelm him.

He sighed as his mouth found a nipple, pulling on it deeply, feeling the bud tighten and harden with desire. She gave a soft yelp, arching against him. A hot stab of desire shot through him as he suckled her, his tongue darting around the hard peak. He couldn't get enough of her. He thought if he died now, it would not matter. He was already in heaven.

Suddenly, he jumped as he felt her hand softly stroking him through his trousers. He was so hard already he was almost bursting, and the feel of her hand was sending him over the edge. He wanted to roughly gather up her gown and plunge into her, over and over. He didn't want to stop until he had finally possessed her, and she was his forever. Body and soul.

Desperately, he fought for control. Now was not the time. When he finally took her, he wanted it to be perfect. And they needed to get back to Highbury. The Duke was worried sick about his daughter and did not yet know what had happened.

With a heaving chest, he pulled away, gazing at her. Her face was flushed, her cheeks two bright spots of pink, and her green eyes were glittering. She looked dazed and confused, as if she had already lost sense of time and place.

"I want you," he whispered fiercely. "I want you more than life itself. But we must get back to Highbury. Your father needs to know that you are safe and well."

She sighed deeply, sitting up. "Yes, you are right. Dear Papa. He will be pacing the floor, tearing his hair out." She gazed at him steadily. "I

want you too, Jasper Burnet. I *will* be yours. We need to believe that. I believe in you, and I hope you believe in me. I know we will be risking everything by telling him. But I am willing to do it.”

“As am I,” he whispered, gazing at her fiercely.

He stood up, pulling her with him. For a moment, they simply stared at each other. There was no need for any more words. They knew what they must do now. He took her hand, leading her out of the hut towards the horse.

They wound their way back through the woods. He didn't hurry. Highbury Manor was not far away now. The shadows of the day were lengthening, stretching out over the woodlands. The sun was starting to dip, ever so slightly, behind the hill. Soon it would be dusk, and the night would descend.

He tightened his grip around her, breathing in the sweet scent of her. He had never expected that this day would unfold as it did. He could hardly believe that he had awoken this morning with no knowledge of what was to come. Would it have turned out any differently if he had?

He took a deep breath. No, he didn't think so. He had been dithering, trying to please everyone. It was always destined for failure. He had wanted Isabella and a chance of his own life and had not dared to face it. Now, through the actions of a madman, everything had become clear, crystallising in his mind.

He had almost lost her. It had been so very close that it didn't bear thinking about. Even the concept of her being married to anyone else was anathema to him. He could hardly fathom how only yesterday he had been resigned to the thought of it, even if it had caused him pain.

They could not help their positions in life. They had been born to them. But somehow, through all of that, they had found each other. He knew now that it was a gift that life had bestowed upon them. They were twin souls; they complemented each other in a way that no one else ever could.

They were meant for one another.

He took a deep breath as they meandered out of the woods. Highbury Manor was ahead of them, just over the field. The place where they had first met and the place where their future would be decided. It was not his home, nor ever would be. But it was hers. It was where she had come from, and he would not have it any other way.

He stopped, reining in the horse. For a long moment, they simply stared at the house. The sky had darkened behind it, turning indigo. He knew he would remember it like this forever.

“Ready?” he whispered into her ear.

She turned in the saddle, smiling at him. A smile so beautiful it took his breath away.

“Ready,” she whispered back.

He nodded, flicking the reins. The horse continued, slowly and steadily, on the path that would decide their future. Their love for

each other was assured. But how would the world react once it knew about it? Was there a place for them together in this world?



## Chapter 25

The Duke was clattering down the staircase towards them as soon as they entered through the front door. He looked so painfully relieved that Isabella's heart twisted in pity for him. Her dear Papa. He must have been going through hell.

She glanced up at Jasper. He looked resolved and determined. She hoped that he wasn't going through too much turmoil at the thought of telling her father about their love. There was simply no way of knowing which way it would go, of course. They were putting themselves out on a very far limb.

"Oh, dearest," cried her father, hugging her fiercely. "I cannot tell you how worried I was!" He pulled back, blinking back tears. "I am so very sorry. You told me how uneasy he made you feel, and I brushed it aside. If only I had realised then that the man was so unstable. It is my fault entirely..."

Isabella laughed softly. "Oh, Papa, please do not blame yourself. It was not your fault at all. I did not realise how mad he truly was either." She took a deep breath, staring at him. "Perhaps we could all go to your study and talk about it? I know that Jasper probably needs a stiff drink. And so might I."

The Duke roared with laughter. "A stiff drink for all! Jolly good! Come along then." He glanced admiringly at Jasper. "The hero of the hour needs his reward!"

They all started walking off. Isabella glanced at Jasper. It was as if they were reading each other's minds. They both knew that Jasper

was seeking a far greater reward than just a restorative drink. How was her father going to react when they finally told him of their love?

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They settled into the study. The Duke fussed around, pouring them all tall glasses of brandy. When they all had the drinks in hand, he sat down, gazing at them expectantly.

“Well?” he burst out. “I do not think I can wait another minute. Tell me what happened.”

Isabella sipped her brandy. “It was as you and Jasper suspected, Papa. Arthur Cluett abducted me and forced me to write that letter to you. He intended to take me to Gretna Green and have us married before the day was out, or by tomorrow morning, at the very latest.”

Her father shuddered, tears in his eyes. “Oh, my dear girl. That despicable man! To think what might have happened to you!” He frowned, his face turning white. “What did he do to you? He did not hurt you?”

Isabella shook her head, her face burning. “No, Papa. He was rough with me, but he did not besmirch my honour. Just my dignity.” She paused. “It is as you said. He needed my dowry. It was not really about me at all. He had just fixated on me as a means to an end. He did not care if he hurt me or anyone else in the process.”

Her father shook his head in disgust. “Arthur Cluett is the foulest creature to have ever drawn breath! What happened to him? His

mother always doted upon him. His uncle tried to step in and fill the gap after his father passed away. To think there was always a monster lurking beneath is horror indeed.” He paused, gazing at Jasper. “I shall charge him for this. If you left him in one piece, that is. You did not run him through, did you?”

Jasper laughed. “No, Your Grace. We fought, but it was your daughter that won the fight. She joined in and bailed him up against a wall.” He glanced quickly at Isabella. “I have never seen a lady so fearless. She is truly amazing.”

“That she is,” said the Duke, gulping his brandy. “Isabella is one of a kind. I am so very proud of her.” He hesitated, gazing at Jasper. “And I am very proud of *you*, young man. I shall be telling your father about what an exceptional son he has. And I am still pondering just how I can show my gratitude for what you have done. You deserve all the rubies in India.”

Isabella cast her eyes towards Jasper. Now was the moment to tell him. They both knew it.

“Actually, Your Grace,” said Jasper, leaning forward, clutching his glass of brandy so tightly it was a wonder the glass did not shatter. “There is something worth more to me than any jewels or words of praise.”

“What is it?” asked the Duke quickly, smiling at him fondly. “Name your price.”

Jasper hesitated. Isabella’s heart slammed hard in her chest.

“Your daughter and I have become...extremely fond of each other,” continued Jasper in a strangled voice. “Neither of us intended it, but our feelings for each other have grown to the extent that they cannot be denied.” He took a deep breath. “I am asking for the hand of your daughter, Your Grace. We wish to be married.”

The Duke gasped. His head swivelled from Jasper to Isabella. “Is this a jest?” he asked eventually, his eyebrows almost reaching the ceiling.

Isabella’s heart sank. He didn’t believe Jasper. But then, it was a shock. Her dear Papa had no inkling that they felt this way towards each other. Perhaps it was only that shock that was speaking.

“It is no jest, Papa,” she said quickly, raising her chin. “Jasper and I are deeply in love. We want to be together forever. I know that it is not conventional...”

“Conventional?” spluttered her father. “No, it is not that!” He gazed from one to the other. “But you must see that it is impossible! Whatever your feelings are for each other, you cannot marry. You are the daughter of a duke, Isabella. The world would scorn you and your union. You would lose your place in society.”

“What do I care of it?” cried Isabella, distraught. “I would rather be married to Jasper and lead an honest life entirely ours than marry someone I could never love just to have the approval of society!”

Her father shook his head as if the idea was preposterous. “You are young, my dear. I know that you think you can never fall in love again, but that shall change. It is only first love, which rarely lasts. This is the rest of your life we are talking about. I could never allow it,

only to have you regret it to your dying day. Because you *would* regret it, Isabella. I am sorry to tell you this, but it is the plain truth.”

Isabella’s eyes filled with frustrated tears. How could she get through to him that she would never love anyone but Jasper?

“It has been a long day,” said the Duke, draining his glass and setting it down on a side table. “Emotions are overwrought. I think we should settle you for the evening, my dear. You have had a very big shock, a terrible experience. Perhaps you are both speaking from a place of such intensity. Things shall cool down tomorrow in the cold light of day.”

“No, Your Grace,” said Jasper, shaking his head determinedly. “I shall not change my mind tomorrow, and nor shall Isabella. We sincerely love each other. Perhaps what happened today made us finally realise it, but it is genuine. You have my word that I would treat her like gold. She is more precious to me than anything in this world.”

The Duke stared at him. “Well, I admire your spunk. It takes a brave man to even speak of such a love for his better.” He took a deep breath. “I thank you deeply for what you did today, Jasper Burnet. I truly admire you and think you a fine man. And if you had been born a gentleman, I would not hesitate to give the hand of my only daughter to you. But you are not. I hope you shall come to understand it is the best decision for everyone.”

Jasper reeled back, looking so hurt that it took all of Isabella’s strength not to take his hand.

“Promise me that you shall at least think about it, Papa,” she said desperately. “Do not just dismiss it out of hand. I know we have

shocked you.”

Her father sighed deeply. “Very well, Isabella, if it shall pacify you. I shall think on it. But I do not want either of you to get your hopes up, for I fear you are destined for disappointment.” He stood up, staring at Jasper, holding out his hand. “I shall shake your hand now, Jasper, and thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you did for my daughter. But we are about to dine for the evening, and I am sure your own father will be worrying where you are.”

Jasper stood up, shaking his hand. His face was a rictus of disappointment.

“Of course, Your Grace,” he said, his voice low and pained.

Isabella stood up too. She wanted to appeal to her father again, to implore him, to stamp her foot and not leave this room until he had agreed to this, but she saw it was useless. His face was implacable.

Papa could only be pushed so far. He was the mildest man in so many ways, accommodating and often easily swayed – especially when it came to his children - but when he got that look upon his face, there was no use pushing him.

“I will walk Jasper out,” she said quickly, raising her chin, daring her father to defy her.

He looked pained. “As you wish. Thank you once again, Jasper. You have my eternal gratitude. And please, give my best wishes to your father.”

Jasper nodded. They left the room.

The sky had darkened considerably by the time they reached the stables. A pearlescent moon hung above the earth, and stars were just beginning to sparkle. Isabella turned to him, so heavy with sorrow she couldn't speak.

"Isabella," he said in such a gentle voice that it almost broke her heart. "Look at me."

She raised her chin, staring straight at him. Her own bitter disappointment was mirrored there, but he was trying to smile. For her sake.

"We knew it was not going to be easy," he said slowly. "And we took your father completely by surprise. He had no time to think about his reaction." He paused. "There is still hope. He promised to think about it, and he is a man of his word."

She nodded, her face twisting. "Yes, I know. It just boils my blood to hear him say such things. I know he is no different from anyone else in this world with his attitudes, but it is very disappointing. Especially since he truly does esteem you as a person. It confounds me that he cannot look past your position."

Jasper sighed. "He is only looking out for you, Isabella. You are young, and sometimes love does not last. People can mistake infatuation for love. He just doesn't want you to do something you may come to regret for the rest of your life."

“I will not,” she said, stamping her foot in her frustration. “I know my own mind. Why cannot anyone see that? He is as bad as that madman Arthur Cluett, trying to tell me what I think and feel. It drives me to distraction.”

“Your father is not Arthur Cluett,” he said gently. “He is a reasonable man who has raised valid points about a union such as ours. Give him some time to think it through, and then we will try again. Promise me that you will not be impetuous and push him before he is ready. It might just do the opposite of what you want.”

Isabella bit her lip. It pained her to say it, but Jasper was right. If she harped on at her father about it, he might refuse them outright. At least now, there was still a faint possibility that he might say yes. It was remote, but it was there.

“You should go inside,” he whispered, kissing her on the forehead. “You have had a terrible day. You look like you are about to keel over on your feet.”

She smiled wearily. It suddenly hit her with the force of a brick to the head. She was exhausted, only wanting to crawl into bed. She might even ask if she could skip dinner entirely or have it brought up on a tray to her room.

“I love you,” she whispered, tears springing into her eyes. “Never forget it.”

“As I love you,” he whispered back, mounting his horse. “Keep faith.



And get some rest. I shall see you very soon.”

And then he was gone, riding through the gates, disappearing into the darkness.

She sighed, walking back to the house. She wanted to believe that they could convince her father eventually. But it wasn't looking good at the moment. What was going to happen to them? How could they give each other up now, after all they had been through? When they had finally confessed how they felt about each other?

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Jasper was almost falling out of the saddle by the time he got to Collstock. The streets were as quiet as a graveyard. He knew that the blacksmith shop would be closed for the night and his father and Timothy already at their dinner, tended by Susannah.

He got to the house, tethering the horse, but then stopped on the threshold. They would all be agog wondering where he had gotten to for the day, but he just couldn't face it at the moment. It had all been so intense and confusing that his mind was reeling.

Instead, he turned, walking back down the quiet street, watching the moon hanging in the sky. It was a truly beautiful sight and somehow comforting his turmoil.

*The Duke refused. He will not let me marry Isabella.*

He kicked a stone disconsolately. He always knew that this would be the outcome. It was ludicrous to think that it could ever have been any different. And even though he had comforted Isabella, assuring her that her father may indeed change his mind, he didn't think it was likely. More probable that pigs would start to fly than a duke let a blacksmith's son marry his daughter.

His heart shifted in his chest. He had allowed himself to hope. And now, all hope was gone. They had declared their love for one another, and yet she was still as far away from him as ever. He was like a little boy crying for that beautiful moon.

He sighed deeply, heading back. His father and the others deserved to know he was back. They would be worried. And he still must live in the real world. As much as he wished he could just leave it all behind and be with Isabella forever.

## Chapter 26

Jasper walked into the shop. He had just finished breakfast and had only gone to wash, but his father was already hard at work, bent over the anvil, his face creased in concentration.

He stared at the older man. There were lines of weariness in his face and dark circles under his eyes, but he was still here, every day, come hail or shine. Not only that, he loved his work. It still excited him, just as much as it always had. Josiah Burnet was a man who fervently loved what he did. There weren't many people like that in the world.

Jasper waited for the familiar guilt to assail him, but it never came. All he could think about was Isabella and how much he wanted to be with her. How he would give the world for her to become his wife. How wonderful life could be if they were together.

His heart shifted, and it was as if a heavy stone had been moved off his chest. He couldn't tell his father about Isabella – it was too soon, and besides, there might be nothing to tell anyway – but he could start by making a stand about his own life and how he wanted to live it.

*Because I deserve to fervently love what I do just as much as my father does.*

“Pa,” he called, trying to get his father’s attention.

The man smiled, straightening, tossing his tools aside. “What is it, Jasper?”

He hesitated. "Could we go for a quick walk before Timothy gets here and the day begins? It will not take long."

His father nodded, looking mystified, but he didn't say anything. They walked out of the shop, walking a short distance away. Jasper knew that his father would never leave the workshop unattended. From here, he could still keep an eye upon it.

"You were very quiet at dinner last evening," said his father at last, turning towards him. "Very quiet. You looked like you were about to fall asleep into your stew."

Jasper smiled faintly. He hadn't told anyone at the dinner table about the dramatic events of the day. He knew that the Duke and Isabella would not like it to become village gossip. And even though he trusted everyone at that table to mind their tongues, it could still leak out accidentally. It sometimes happened.

Besides, he didn't want to speak of it with them. They would probably wonder why he had risked his life, tearing across the countryside, to fight a gentleman. Chivalry for a lady's honour only went so far. And he didn't want to have to explain that it was more than that; his feelings for Isabella ran deep. Especially in front of Susannah, who seemed to have a special antenna for such matters.

It seemed safer just not to mention it at all. So he hadn't. He had mumbled an excuse about having to see the Duke and being waylaid, and as soon as he could, he had left the room, climbing the stairs and falling upon the bed in an exhausted stupor.

“It was a busy day,” he said quickly. “I hope I didn’t look rude. But I could barely keep my eyes open.”

His father waved a hand in the air dismissively. “No one judges you for it, Jasper. You know that.” He paused. “We are all just a little worried about you, that is all. You haven’t been yourself lately.”

Jasper stared off into space. This was the ideal moment to explain to his father what it was about. Or at least part of it. A very big part, even though the situation with Isabella had suddenly consumed his mind, pushing it further back.

He took a deep breath. “That is why I want to talk to you,” he said slowly, his voice thick with emotion. “I know that the shop means everything to you. That you have worked tirelessly over the years to build the business and that your fondest wish is for me to step into your footsteps and become head blacksmith once you retire.”

His father nodded. “Aye. I fought tooth and nail to get the shop back in the day. I borrowed money to do it. It was always my dream. And I truly love the work. It never grows old for me.” He stared at Jasper steadily. “But I am not such a fool as to not realise you do not feel the same way as I do about it, my son.”

Jasper hung his head. It had finally been spoken. Of course, he had suspected that his father knew about his reservations. It had just been there, hovering between them, but neither of them had ever voiced it.

Even now, he fought down the instinct to deny it so that he wouldn’t hurt his father’s feelings. It was the reason he had never been able to speak of it. He never wanted to hurt him.

But suddenly, he realised he *had* been hurting him, in not speaking of it. In trying not to, he had created a gulf between them. Isabella rushed into his mind – the fearless way she had asserted that it was better to be honest and face the consequences than live a lie. It was the truth.

“No, I do not feel the same way about it as you do,” he said slowly, tears prickling his eyes. “I have tried, Pa. Lord knows I have tried for your sake. I did not want your life’s work to be for nothing – for the shop to pass on to a stranger. I wanted it to be a Burnet family business. But I am simply not the man that you are. I am someone different entirely.”

His father sighed heavily, looking pained. “Aye. You are not a blacksmith, Jasper, and never will be. I have wrestled with that fact for a long time. Of course, I would prefer the business be handed down to you. What father wouldn’t? But it means nought in the end if you are miserable, son.”

Jasper stared at his father, so overwhelmed, he could not speak for a moment. His father had just said he didn’t want him to spend his life in misery for him. It was like he had been handed the keys to a kingdom he thought forever beyond his grasp.

“I set you free, Jasper,” continued his father in a strangled voice. “My dearest wish is for you to find the meaning of *your* life. You have always wanted to travel and have adventures. You have always been a restless soul, wanting more from life than Collstock could offer. Your soul will end up shrivelling if you stay here. That is the truth.”

Jasper’s heart lurched. “I am sorry to disappoint you,” he said slowly.

“More than I can say. I wish I could have been the son that you wanted.”

His father looked at him in astonishment. “What are you talking about? You *are* the son I want. You are more than a worker in my shop. You are your own person. And that person is a joy to me, Jasper. You are brave and fearless and kind. You have grown into a man that I am so proud of. Nothing could ever change that.”

Jasper stared at his father. “You truly mean that?”

His father nodded. “Of course I do. It has been a hard road for you since your ma died. A hard road for both of us.” He paused, his eyes shining with tears. “She would be as proud of you as I am, son. Never doubt it.”

Jasper quickly looked away. It meant the world to him that his father was saying this. More than anything. It had sat like a weight upon his soul for so long. And now, his father was telling him that not only did he not have to take over the shop if he did not wish to, but that he was proud of him, as well. Despite the fact Josiah Burnet wanted the shop to be a family business.

His soul lifted. He was free. He could do anything that he wanted to, go wherever he desired. Set sail on a ship to foreign lands. Leave Collstock forever if he wished. It was what he had always wanted. It had been a burning desire for so long.

His fists tightened. But of course, it was not so simple any longer. There was Isabella. How could he leave her? Her father would never agree to a match. The only solution was to run away with her if he wanted her by his side.

His heart lurched in sorrow. He could not do that to her and her family. She would be disgraced, her family estranged from her, scorned by her society. She would slowly wither and die through it. But equally, how could he settle here just to snatch stolen moments with her? It would be like having a taste of the sweetest fruit that he could never fully possess.

Perhaps it was better just to leave. She would heal in time. It would be the best thing for her in the long run. She must realise that.

“I am sorry that I pushed you to marry Susannah,” continued his father, sighing. “I know that you do not love her, son. Not the way I loved your ma. And it was selfish of me to say you should settle with a lass you do not love just to get you to take over the business.”

Jasper shrugged. “I like Susannah. But no, she is not the woman for me, Pa.” His face twisted. “I will never have the woman I want.”

His father was silent for a moment. “You are a fighter, son. Always have been, always will be. One of the most fearless men I have ever encountered.” He paused. “If you love a lass with your body and soul, then you fight for her. It is that simple.”

Jasper frowned. “But it’s not...”

His father gazed at him sternly. “You listen to me, Jasper Burnet. I do not know who you speak of, but I know love. I know that a man can die by losing his only love. It almost killed me when I lost your ma. You were the only reason I kept living.” His face tightened. “At least



your ma and I had many happy years together. I do not want my son to never experience that with his own love. You fight for her, son.”

Jasper gazed across the market square. The village was springing to life. The shopkeepers were sweeping down their front steps, calling greetings to one another. Just another regular day in Collstock. A day like any other.

Jasper took a deep breath. Except that it wasn't. His father was right. The truth of it burnt away his doubts. He must fight for Isabella – show her father that he was the only man for her. Convince the Duke that he would always love and cherish his daughter. But how?

Quickly, he stood up, his mind whirring and his blood pumping.

“Thank you, Pa,” he said in a wavering voice. “For everything. You are the best father that a man could ever have. I thank the Lord daily that a man like you raised me.”

His father waved a dismissive hand in the air, but Jasper could tell he was touched.

“Go on with you,” he said, standing up, grinning. “It is time I set to work. And I think it is high time you set your life in order, son. Begin as you want to continue. That is what I always say.” He paused. “There is something else that I must tell you as we walk. Something that your ma left you. I was going to give it to you when you took over the shop, but I think you should have it now. It might just help you find your true path – and your way to that woman you love – quicker than you think.”

Mystified, Jasper stared at his father. They slowly walked back towards the shop. Jasper put his arm around his father's shoulders as his father spoke. He was so astonished by what he said he couldn't quite grasp it.

It truly was a brand-new day. And the possibilities were suddenly endless.

## Chapter 27

Isabella stabbed her thumb with the embroidery needle, drawing blood. Quickly, she raised it to her mouth, sucking it before the blood spilled onto the patch. It often happened nowadays. She had never had a hand for embroidery, but now, it was getting ridiculous.

Sighing, she stood up, tossing the patch onto a side table. It had been awkward over breakfast. She and her father had carefully avoided talking about what had been discussed yesterday.

She was mindful of not pushing him. But more than once, she had looked up and seen his eyes upon her, looking pensive. He didn't say anything, though. And after breakfast had ended, he had quickly left, saying he must go to Shrewsbury to see to some urgent business.

She yawned, stretching. She had slept badly, her mind a whirl. All she could think about was Jasper and how they could be together. And now, the awful thought kept returning. The thought that if Papa refused them, then they must run away together. Start a new life far from here.

She walked slowly to the parlour window, gazing out, her eyes filling with tears. She didn't want to do it to her family. Her father would be shocked and appalled. Nathaniel would be mortified. It would cause a great scandal that would impact both of them. But what choice did she and Jasper have? She knew she could not live without him. It would be as if she was suffering a slow death for the rest of her life.

It was like being in the midst of a maelstrom.

She watched as the carriage rattled through the front gates. Papa had returned from Shrewsbury. He got out of the carriage, looking quite pleased with himself. She sighed heavily. He had obviously pushed the thought of his daughter and Jasper Burnet out of his mind entirely, thinking the business was over.

Suddenly, she stiffened. Another rider was flying through the gates. A single figure on horseback.

It was Jasper.

Her eyes widened in alarm as she watched him pull up the horse in front of the carriage. Her father turned, greeting him, smiling. They spoke for a minute before Jasper dismounted. A groom came, leading the horse away, as the two men walked up the front steps together before vanishing from her sight.

Her heart was pounding hard. Jasper had come to Highbury and wanted to speak to her father. And her father had not spurned him. Should she rush out and intercept them? Demand that be present as they spoke?

*No, she thought, restraining herself with difficulty. Let Jasper speak to him alone. Perhaps he has a plan.*

She took a deep breath. She couldn't stay in the house. Quickly, she grabbed her shawl off the back of a chair. She would go for a walk through the gardens. It would distract her. By the time she returned, perhaps there would be good news.

Her heart was in her mouth as she walked down the back staircase, careful to avoid them.

*Please, she prayed fervently. Please God. Let us find a way to be together without hurting anyone. That is all I want in this world.*

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Jasper sat down opposite the Duke in his study. They didn't speak. The gentleman poured them both a brandy, settling opposite him.

Jasper studied him for a moment. He looked relaxed, almost pleased. And he hadn't looked at all perturbed to see him ride up, greeting him warmly. When Jasper had requested an audience, the Duke had accepted with alacrity. Jasper didn't want to read anything into the Duke's demeanour, but he couldn't help but be cautiously optimistic.

He took a deep breath. It was better to just plunge into it. And he had a very solid plan of attack now. Far more solid than before he had spoken with his father this morning. He still could not quite believe what had landed in his lap. His father had given him a great gift indeed. One that might just be the thing that got him over the finishing line.

"Your Grace..." he said, leaning forward.

To his surprise, the Duke put his hand in the air to stop his words. Biting his lip, Jasper leant back into the seat, watching him carefully.

The Duke obviously wanted to start proceedings, and he had no choice but to comply.

“I have just returned from seeing my solicitor in Shrewsbury,” said the Duke slowly, his eyes twinkling. “The man was busy and just managed to squeeze me in. An impromptu appointment, you see. But quite necessary in the circumstances.”

Jasper nodded, mystified.

“I wanted to speak to Isabella about this first,” the Duke continued, scratching his head. “But no matter. You have arrived, and this is often business conducted between men, at any rate. Not that I have such a low opinion of the female sex.” He paused. “Isabella is very much like her mother. Did you know that?”

Jasper shook his head slowly.

The Duke smiled. “Yes, indeed. Caroline – Carrie, as I called her – was a firecracker. A bright spark who defied everyone. She overcame me. I had never seen a flame burn so brightly in my life.” He cleared his throat. “She was unconventional. She studied the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, I will have you know. She believed in the rights of a woman to lead her own life. And the apple has not fallen far from the tree where Isabella is concerned.”

Jasper nodded. “Isabella is the most unusual woman I have ever met,” he said, his heart twisting. “I never knew a woman could think and behave like her.”

The Duke coughed into his hand. "I was pondering it last night in bed," he continued, frowning. "I could not sleep. All I could think about was Carrie and what she would say in this instance. How deeply disappointed she would have been in me for acting the way I did when you both told me of your love for each other. Carrie would have smiled and told her daughter to live her life fearlessly, exactly as she wished, and the world be damned."

Jasper's heart started racing. But he knew better than to rush in and interrupt. Not yet.

"Carrie also left Isabella something," said the Duke, twiddling his thumbs. "A nest egg which was entirely separate to her dowry, which comes from my estate, at any rate. It was money that Carrie's own family left her and which she decided to bequeath to Isabella." He paused. "My wife said to me before she died, 'It will give her choices in life. It will free her to be the woman she wishes to be. No daughter of mine will be forced into marrying if she does not wish it.'"

Jasper's heart was slamming in his chest now.

The Duke coughed again, looking embarrassed. "I always just assumed I would tell her about it when the time came for her to marry," he said slowly. "I assumed she would wish to combine it with her dowry to make a more advantageous match. I simply forgot about it. But now I see that it is her mother's way of taking part in this conversation. It is her mother's way of insisting that I listen to what our daughter wants in this life."

"Your Grace..."

The Duke held up his hand again. "Not yet, Jasper. There are

conditions. I am only telling you this first because you just showed up. I will speak to Isabella about it, and if she agrees, I shall release it to her immediately. That was the reason I spoke to the solicitor. It is a substantial sum, and she shall be in control of it. It gives her freedom to pursue her own life if that is what she wants.” He paused. “It is up to her to decide if she wishes to take it to pursue a life with you.”

Jasper could barely breathe. “Are you saying you give your blessings to our union then?”

The Duke sighed. “I still have reservations. It will not be an easy life for her. She will be shunned by most of good society for choosing to marry a man such as yourself.” He paused. “But Isabella does not care for society’s good opinion anyway. She would rather live her life the way she wants. And it rather seems that she cannot be happy without *you*, Jasper Burnet.”

Jasper leant forward in the seat. He must speak now. The words were burning in his chest.

“I am overcome, Your Grace,” he said, his heart flipping over in his chest. “And I want to assure you that I do not bring nothing to our marriage if that is what Isabella chooses.” He took a deep breath. “I spoke with my father this morning. It seems my departed mother also left me something....”

He reached into his pocket, taking out a package wrapped in an old lace handkerchief. Carefully, he unwrapped it, holding it up to the light.

The Duke gasped, his eyes widening. “Why, it is a pure sapphire! One of the largest that I have ever beheld! It must be worth a small



fortune...”

Jasper nodded. It was exactly what he had thought when his father had given it to him this morning, telling him that it would ensure his freedom, to do what he wished with his life. And hopefully, secure the woman of his dreams.

“It came from my mother, as I said,” he continued, his voice thick with emotion, passing the sapphire to the Duke. “She left it to me. Apparently, my mother’s family were jewellers in Shrewsbury. And an obscenely wealthy customer gifted it to my mother one day on a whim because she had the prettiest eyes he had ever seen.” He paused, taking a deep breath. “She took care of it, saving it for a rainy day. She offered it to my father to help set up the blacksmith shop, but he was too proud to take it. And so, she kept it...and bequeathed it to me, her only child.”

The Duke was absorbed in the jewel, turning it over in his hands, holding it up to the light.

Jasper took another deep breath. “If you and Isabella agree, I am planning to sell it,” he said slowly. “I believe the proceeds of the sale will go far to securing Isabella and I financially. We should want for nothing. I can take care of your daughter, Your Grace. Perhaps not quite in the manner to which she is accustomed, but she will not be a pauper.”

“No,” breathed the Duke, looking at him sharply. “No, she will never be that. With this jewel and her own money from her mother, you both shall be very comfortable. And I will, of course, settle her dowry as well.” His face suddenly broke into a wide grin as he handed the jewel back. “Well, it is all settled then, my boy! We shall get the finances worked out, and then you are free to marry! What do you say to *that*?”

Jasper's heart expanded. He wanted to jump into the air. He wanted to holler as loud as he could. He was filled with an exuberance and a jubilation beyond anything that he had ever felt in his life before.

They were free. They had money to live on for the rest of their lives. He would not be taking her away to force her into a life of hardship and penury. Their future was secured.

"But there is something you must do first, of course," continued the Duke, winking. "You must ask for my daughter's hand properly. I think that I saw her wandering around in the gardens through the window. She must be burning with curiosity to know what is happening in here. Perhaps it is time to seek her out and put her out of her misery."

They both stood up. Jasper held out his hand. The Duke took it, shaking it firmly. They didn't speak for a moment.

"You know I always thought you a first-rate fellow," said the Duke slowly. "Right from the moment that you first stepped in here delivering those swords. That was the reason I asked you to teach Nathaniel. I have a good instinct about people." He paused. "You will do well for my daughter, Jasper. You are like-minded. I sense she will be free to be truly herself with you in a way she never could be with anyone else. And that is the reason, beyond anything else, that I give you both my blessing."

Jasper's heart lurched. The Duke was such a good man. A man that he would be proud to call his father-in-law when the day came. He smiled slowly. If it came, of course. He still had to ask Isabella properly.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” he said, a lump forming in his throat. “You are truly one in a thousand. And Isabella is as much *your* daughter as her mother’s. For it is from you she gets her kindness and grace.”

The Duke beamed. “Well, that is decent of you, Jasper!” He paused. “Now, away with you! Go and find her, my man. Make haste while the sun shines and all that.”

Jasper didn’t need to be told twice. He was out of that room and running down the staircase, towards the back of the house. He almost collided with Nathaniel, who was idling up, book in hand, as always.

“Jasper!” gasped the boy, his eyes shining. “Are you going to propose to my sister at last?”

Jasper stared at him dumbfounded. He hadn’t realised that the boy had any inkling of his feelings for Isabella. Had he been eavesdropping on the conversation yesterday, or had he been told since?

“I always knew,” said Nathaniel, smiling brightly. “I knew you loved each other from the very first. It just took the two of you a little while longer to find out, that’s all.” His smile widened. “I think it is splendid! To think you will be my brother!”

Jasper laughed, reaching out and ruffling the boy’s hair. He was so very fond of the lad. “I need to speak to your sister first,” he said, continuing on down the stairs. “Wish me luck!”

Nathaniel laughed too. “Good luck! Not that you will need it!”

Jasper’s heart swelled as he walked towards the back entrance. He felt the jewel nestling in his pocket, rubbing it reverently.

*To think. It is both our mothers, long gone from this world, who have given us this chance to be together.*

He couldn’t help feeling as if both those exceptional women were gazing down now, urging him on. He could almost sense them.

## Chapter 28

Isabella meandered amongst the rose bushes, pausing to lean down and smell one or two blooms as she walked. It was beautiful here. She remembered that it had always been one of her mother's favourite places within the gardens. Mama had always said that to be amongst roses was like walking into heaven itself.

She glanced back at the house. Had she been gone for long enough? Should she start to head back? She didn't want to miss Jasper before he left. And she needed to know what had happened. Whether it was good or bad news. Even if it was bad, she just wanted to know. It would be a bitter disappointment, of course, but better to face it head-on.

She kept walking, her eyes sweeping over the garden. The tall white statues, the arbour, the vegetable and herb patches. In the distance was an old swing that she and her brother had played on as children. But it was swinging in the wind, rickety and abandoned now. She had not been on it in years, and Nathaniel no longer used it.

Her heart lurched, remembering her mother pushing Nathaniel on it. The little boy had been laughing hysterically. Mama had pushed her, too, when she had been little. And now, it was abandoned, a relic of a time long gone.

Slowly, she walked towards it, sitting gingerly in the seat. She half expected it to break in two. But it held her weight, and slowly she pushed her legs, gaining momentum. Soon she was soaring through the air, her hair tumbling from its hairpins, flying around her face.

She closed her eyes, letting the wind caress her face. It felt wonderful. One of the closest things to freedom that she had ever experienced. She couldn't believe that she had not done this in years. It was intoxicating.

Slowly, she let the swing fall, opening her eyes. A strange, bittersweet melancholy had entered her soul. If her father refused Jasper, they would have no choice but to run away. They could not live without each other. And if that happened, she might never see Highbury again. The only home she had ever known, lost to her forever.

Her heart tightened. She didn't want to lose it. She didn't want to lose Papa and Nathaniel or Emily or even Aunt Jemima, who was crotchety but good-hearted. But if they ran away, no one could ever speak to her again. The foul taint of scandal would surround her like a dark miasma. She would be known as the lady who had run off with the son of a blacksmith. Could she bear it?

She gritted her teeth. She could bear anything for Jasper. She must. But it was a high price to pay, indeed.

Suddenly, it was as if the breath left her lungs. He was there in the distance. Jasper, walking towards her. She couldn't tell anything by his face. He wasn't smiling. He simply had her in his sights.

Her heart tightened again. He was worth it. He was worth any price she had to pay.

She got up from the swing, walking towards him, her heart thumping painfully. When they were close enough to speak, he reached out, taking her hand.

“Well?” she whispered, her eyes wide. “Tell me. Just tell me!”

Slowly, he sunk down upon one knee in front of her, still holding her hand. Her heart started racing. His face was grave as he looked up at her.

“Lady Isabella Finch,” he said in a very formal voice. “I have spoken with your father. And I am delighted to say that he has given his approval.” He paused, his hand tightening upon her own. “Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

Gobsmacked, she simply stared at him. Her jaw dropped open. Had she just heard him correctly? Had he just said that her father had given his approval? Was he joking?

“Are you jesting?” she asked slowly.

He broke out into a grin of delight. “No jest, Isabella. I will explain it all to you later. It is well done indeed.” He paused, staring at her intently. “And now, will you just answer the question before I surely die?”

Her head reeled for a moment. But it was as if everything was suddenly coming into sharp focus. The statues, the roses, the house in the distance. The impossible blue of the sky. The wind, blowing around them, sending her hair in all directions.

She would never forget this moment as long as she lived.

“Yes!” she cried, her heart somersaulting in her chest. “Of course the answer is yes! A thousand times over!”

And then, they were in each other’s arms. He was kissing her ardently. She laughed with the sheer joy of it. For it was indeed the most beautiful moment of her life.

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They sat down beneath the tall elm tree at the very edge of the gardens, gazing into the woods beyond. She rested her head against his shoulder, her heart overflowing with joy. It didn’t seem real at all. She felt as if someone would start shaking her soon, and she would awake to find it was all a dream.

“How?” she whispered. “How is it possible?”

Jasper grinned, turning to her. His brown eyes were alight with joy. “We have our mothers to thank for it, Isabella. If it wasn’t for them, well, I do not know whether your father would have ever given his permission.”

Of all the things he could have said, she hadn’t been expecting that at all.

“What have our mothers to do with it?” she asked breathlessly.



He didn't reply. Instead, he reached into the pocket of his jacket, taking out something wrapped in an old lace handkerchief. He passed it to her. Bewildered, she opened it. There was a sapphire lying in her hands. It was the size of a coin and beautiful, refracting light, shining like a blue star.

"I...I do not understand," she said, gazing at it. "Who does this belong to?"

He smiled. "It belonged to my mother," he said slowly. "It was given to her by a benefactor many years ago. She kept it safe, and when she died, she bequeathed it to me." He paused. "I did not know it existed until this morning. My father gave it to me, after I told him that I could not take over the business and it seemed that I could not have the woman I wanted as a wife. He wanted to give me the freedom to choose the path I wanted."

Isabella stared at the jewel. "Why did he never tell you of it?"

Jasper shrugged. "He struggled with the fact that he wanted me to take over the business and my reluctance to do so. He was saving it for when I did, thinking it would entice me to stay in Collstock. But after our talk, he realised there was no point. And he wants me to live the life I was always destined to live." He stared at her. "And have the wife I was always destined to have."

Her heart trembled as she kept staring at the jewel. A mother's final gift to her child from beyond the grave.

“It must be worth a fortune,” she breathed. “Is it the reason Papa relented?”

He nodded. “One of the reasons. But you also received a gift from your own mother, Isabella. She left you a substantial sum of money to do with what you will. There are no conditions upon it. She wanted you to be able to choose your own path in life as well.”

Isabella’s jaw dropped. It was all making sense now. Why Papa had rushed off to Shrewsbury this morning and why he had looked so pleased with himself. He had already decided that he would give his permission, and he had been securing her financial future so that when they did marry, they would never have to worry again.

“We can be free,” she said, her voice filled with wonder. “Truly free. We can do anything that we like. Live anywhere we want.” She paused, gazing at Jasper. “And part of our money will come from you, which means that you will rise in society’s eyes. A newly made gentleman, no less, with his own nest egg.”

He laughed. “I do not care about being a gentleman except for the fact it benefits *you*, Isabella.” He paused. “But it does give us our freedom to design our lives anyway we want. And that is worth more to me than anything.”

She kept staring at the sapphire. Now she understood why he had said it was their mothers who had made this possible. Without their generous bequeaths, it would have been so much harder for her father to say yes. For she knew now, he had always wanted to. He had just been worried about how it would affect her life and how they would live.

Now all of that worry was gone. With their combined fortunes, they could marry and still be accepted by high society. There would still be a whiff of scandal surrounding them, of course. It wasn't every day that the daughter of a duke married the son of a blacksmith after all. But it would be lowkey, and it would pass.

If they had been forced to run off together, it would have been so much worse. They had her father's approval, and that mattered a lot. He was the Duke of Coventry. He had much influence.

She breathed a sigh of pure relief. She did not have to lose her home nor her loved ones. Neither did Jasper. They could be together openly, living their lives exactly the way they chose.

It was like being told she held the keys to heaven itself.

Isabella turned to him, so full of light that she could barely fathom it. She had woken up this morning believing that this would never be possible. That her father's consent for their union was never going to happen.

That they would be forced to become runaways, living on their love alone. It would have been a hard life. She had been willing to do it for Jasper, and she knew that he would have done it for her. But now, it wasn't necessary.

Fate had intervened in the most beautiful of ways.

"I would have lived in a ditch with you," she said slowly, her heart twisting. "You know that, do you not?"

He nodded slowly. "As I would have with you," he replied. "But now, we are truly free, Isabella." He paused, gazing at her with such tenderness in his eyes her heart rolled over in her chest. "I can never love anyone but you. I was a fool to have fought the truth of it for so long. And if I had been forced to live without you, I would probably have died."

Tears sprang into her eyes again. And finally, they spilled over. She simply couldn't help it. Could there be any greater joy in the world than this?

Tenderly, he wiped them away, murmuring endearments to her. She closed her eyes, basking in the sweetness of his love. They could be like this forever. It still seemed impossible that she would wake up beside him for the rest of her life and experience this joy every day.

Suddenly, she saw her father and Nathaniel ambling towards them across the lawn. They were both beaming. Their smiles were so wide they looked as if they might crack their faces entirely.

"Ah," said her father, as soon as they were close enough. "There is the happy couple!" He stared expectantly at his daughter. "You have good news for me, my dearest?"

Isabella sprang to her feet, rushing towards them. She couldn't help herself. She threw herself into his arms, almost causing him to topple over. Everyone laughed heartily.

"Thank you, Papa," she whispered. "Thank you from the bottom of my

heart.”

The Duke gazed at her steadily. “It is not me you need thank, Isabella. It is your dear departed mama who always wanted you to have choices in life.” He paused. “Without her bequest and the jewel Jasper’s mother left him, it would have been a far more difficult road you would have travelled.”

Isabella nodded. “Yes. I wish more than anything she could be with us now to see how her generosity has given me my freedom. How she has given me the life I want.”

“She is here,” said the Duke, nodding confidently. “She is watching us now and smiling with delight.” He turned to Jasper. “And your mother is doing the same, my boy.”

Jasper nodded. “I have always thought she is watching over me. Now I know it is true.”

“When is the wedding?” piped up Nathaniel, his eyes as bright as a sparrow that had just spied a juicy worm.

They all laughed. Isabella grabbed him, hugging him fiercely. He squirmed in her embrace, looking mortified. It only made her hug him tighter. How she loved this boy.

“You shall be the first person to know when we set the date,” she smiled. “And we also have you to thank for bringing us together, Nathaniel.” Her smile turned wicked. “If it had not been for your appalling skills with the sword, Papa would never have employed

Jasper. You can have the title of chief matchmaker.”

Nathaniel hit her lightly on the arm. “You are beastly! But it is true, I guess.” He turned to Jasper, smiling shyly. “I am enjoying our lessons so much now. Will you still teach me how to fence now that you are becoming my brother-in-law?”

Jasper laughed, ruffling his hair again. “It will be my honour, Nathaniel. We can’t have you adventuring without being a confident swordsman, can we?”

Nathaniel shook his head, staring at him with unconcealed delight.

“I think this calls for champagne!” cried the Duke. “Let us all go inside and toast the future happiness of Jasper and Isabella.”

They all started walking towards the house. Jasper put his arm around Isabella, smiling down at her. Nathaniel skipped ahead. The Duke pottered behind, contenting himself with smelling flowers as he walked.

“Happy?” whispered Jasper, smiling widely.

“Over the moon,” she whispered back, leaning into him.

“I promise that I will make you happy for the rest of your life,” he whispered. “I will never forget that I am the luckiest man in the world.”

“And I shall never forget that I am the luckiest woman,” she vowed.

She leant her head against his shoulder, feeling their love emanating, like an aura around them. The future stretched before them, shining brightly. And she simply couldn't wait to grasp it.

## Epilogue

The wedding bells of the old church were chiming merrily as Isabella stepped out of the carriage. Emily, who had alighted from the carriage before her, fussed around her, adjusting her train. They smiled at each other.

“You are the most beautiful bride,” whispered Emily fondly. “A pure vision, Isabella.”

Isabella placed a hand on her friend’s arm. “I declare I am so nervous that I might trip,” she confessed, her eyes wide. “You will be there to catch me if I fall, will you not, dearest?”

“Always,” laughed Emily. “And your father will be there too. Although I doubt either of us will be needed. If you fall, your handsome bridegroom will be down that aisle in a flash, catching you before you even hit the ground.” She paused, turning pensive. “I must admit I had my doubts when you first told me that you were marrying him, Isabella. But now that I know him, I see he is the only man who could ever keep up with you. I am so very happy for you, my dear.”

Isabella’s eyes filled with tears. “That means the world to me, Emily. It truly does.” She bit her lip. “Do you think that there will be many in the church? I know that most people we invited responded that they would attend, but they may have changed their minds...”

Emily frowned slightly. “And what if they do? It shall be *their* loss, not yours. If they cannot see past Jasper’s origins and know that you were meant to be together, then they are no friends of mine.”



Isabella squeezed her friend's arm. Dear Emily. She was so loyal. And even though it had genuinely shocked her conventional friend when she told her about Jasper, she knew that once Emily accepted it, there was no going back. Her friend would fight like a tigress on her behalf.

"Come now," said her father, who had stepped out of the carriage after her. "There is no time for girlish gossip, ladies! A young man is waiting rather impatiently, I should imagine, for his bride."

They both laughed. Isabella took her father's arm, leaning into him. They started the slow walk towards the church.

But just as they were about to enter, there was a flurry of activity behind them. They stopped, turning. It was Jasper's father, Josiah Burnet, and his good friend Timothy. They were both slightly out of breath.

"I do beg your pardon," said Mr. Burnet, looking mortified. "We lost track of time! I was showing young Timothy something new in the workshop..."

Isabella and her father burst out laughing. The Duke clapped Mr. Burnet on the back.

"You do not need to apologise, old fellow," he said fondly. "I know that you are trying very hard to get Timothy up to speed now that he is taking over the business!" He turned to Timothy. "How goes it, young man? Are you relishing the task?"

Isabella thought Timothy was going to burst with pride. “Indeed I am, Your Grace,” he said breathlessly. “It is like a dream! To think, I am to run the blacksmith’s shop! I only hope I can be as good as Mr. Burnet one day.”

“You will, Timothy,” said Mr. Burnet, nodding. “You have the eye, and you have a feel for metal. If you work hard and apply yourself, you will be better than me one day. I am sure of it.”

Timothy looked abashed, blushing beetroot red.

“Well, we should be on our way in,” said Mr. Burnet. He turned to Isabella, his eyes softening. “You look so beautiful, my dear. My son is a very lucky man indeed.”

Isabella smiled. She liked Mr. Burnet very much. And she was so pleased that Timothy had agreed to take over the business. It meant that Mr. Burnet’s legacy would continue, even if Jasper wasn’t at the helm. Timothy was over the moon about it, and Mr. Burnet trusted him implicitly. It had worked out brilliantly for everyone involved.

The two men scurried into the church. The Duke turned to Isabella.

“Well, now that everyone is inside, shall we continue?” he asked, his eyes twinkling.

Isabella took a deep breath. “Yes. Let us do it, Papa.”

They stepped into the church. The congregation turned as one towards them. Isabella's eyes widened. The pews were almost full. It seemed that everyone they had invited was here. Aunt Jemima was sitting primly at the front, dressed in dove grey. Nathaniel was seated beside her, his hair uncharacteristically slicked back, looking uncomfortable in his new blue velvet jacket and britches. He was smiling with delight.

And at the altar stood Jasper. Her bridegroom.

His eyes widened with appreciation as he gazed upon her, his eyes roaming over her from head to toe. Isabella blushed fiercely. She had spent a long time and a fair amount of coin on her wedding apparel. But it was all worth it to see that look upon his face.

Her heart flipped over. The day had finally arrived. She was about to become Mrs. Burnet. She knew that it was not a grand title. She knew that she would never be feted upon at society events, despite the fact she was still wealthy. There would always be people who looked down their noses at her, whispering behind their hands, incredulous that a lady of her stature would lower herself in such a way.

But she cared not a fig for any of them. The joy of being Jasper's wife would overshadow it all.

They started slowly walking down the aisle. She was almost there.

Her father bowed to Jasper, giving her hand to her bridegroom. They turned towards each other, gazing deeply into each other's eyes. And at that moment, it was as if they were the only people in that church. Everyone else was gone. It was just two people, about to declare their

eternal love for each other, before God.

The way it always should be.

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After the wedding breakfast was finally over, they climbed into the carriage, waving to the guests who gathered around to send them off. Emily was beaming at them, her face flushed a pretty pink. The Duke was waving in delight. Mr. Burnet looked as proud as punch.

The carriage lurched away. Finally, they were alone.

Jasper turned to her, gazing at her tenderly. “Mrs. Burnet. I swear I cannot believe it.” He paused, his face turning sombre. “You do not have any regrets that you have lost your title, do you, Isabella? That you are no longer the lady of the manor?”

She gazed at him steadily. She knew this was a source of insecurity for him. And she also knew that she needed to reassure him once and for all before their marriage began.

“I would rather be your wife than a princess or a queen,” she declared, raising her chin. “For what is status worth without love? It would be a lonely, sad life indeed, Jasper. I am proud to be Mrs. Burnet. Do not ever doubt it. It has all been worth it, and I would not change it for the world.”

His face transformed, filling with light. Fervently, he kissed her hand.

“Nor would I,” he whispered. “My one and only love.”

She rested her head upon his shoulder. The carriage rattled onwards, towards their new home. The two-storey sandstone country home that Papa had gifted them.

It was small, compared to the sprawling grandeur of Highbury Manor, nestled on three acres. But they had their very own lake and a pretty garden, and Isabella knew they would make it their own. It would be filled with their love.

But the best was yet to come. For while they had a home to always come back to, they did not plan to settle here yet. Within a month, they were going abroad, travelling around Europe.

The majesty of the Alps in Switzerland. The sights of Paris. They planned to see the Colosseum in Rome and hike the Pyrenees. The life of adventure they had both always longed for was just around the corner, glimmering like the rays of a new sun.

Here was their new home, now. Just beyond the rise of the hill. Jasper squeezed her hand tightly.

“Not long now,” he murmured. “And you will truly be my wife. I cannot wait.”

Her heart quickened. Nor could she. They had been waiting a long time for this, and she was ready. More than ready for Jasper to make her his own.

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He took her hand as they lay upon their brand new bed in their brand-new home. She watched his dark eyes shining with desire, sweeping over her hair spilling onto the pillow, and her new white nightgown, especially made for this night.

She trembled. Now that they were finally here, the enormity of it was overwhelming her. But she needn't have feared. As soon as Jasper's lips slowly descended upon her own, the familiar desire sprang up in her, as fierce as ever. The nerves slowly died away as a delicious sweetness started curling inside her, sweeping over her entire body.

His lips trailed down her neck, finding her breasts, suckling with fierce abandon. She closed her eyes in pure ecstasy. A warm wetness seeped out of her. And then, he travelled lower, his lips searing her belly, before arriving at the very core of her.

She arched her back as his tongue probed her hot flesh, flicking and licking, creating a maelstrom of fury inside her. He moaned, deep in his throat. The sensations were building, with an intensity she had never felt before. It was as if she was being carried on a chariot through heaven's gates.

"Oh," she moaned, overcome. "Yes, Jasper! Yes, my love, yes...."

The peak hit her quickly, so forcefully, that she cried out, spasming violently. Just as it started to recede, he moved upwards, covering her body. She felt his hardness nestle between her legs. There was a quick, sharp pain, and then he slid inside her, filling her so completely that she cried out again.

“I love you so much,” he whispered, his eyes boring into her own.

“As I love you,” she whispered back.

He started to move inside her, slowly at first and then with increasing urgency. It was so surprisingly beautiful to feel him inside her that she gasped. She had not known what to expect at all and thought it might be just pain. But it was as if this union of their bodies sealed their love in some profound way, as if their physical joining brought their souls closer, as well.

And those incredible sensations were blossoming to life again within her, growing stronger as he moved deeper inside her. She was on that heavenly trajectory once more.

She arched against him, wanting him deeper still. Suddenly, he convulsed, gripping her tightly. At the same time, the sensations within her peaked again, crashing over her, even more intense than the first time.

He fell against her, panting. For a long moment, they did not speak. Then he reached out, trailing a finger down the side of her face. His eyes were filled with love as well as satiated desire.

“I have been dreamt of the moment you were mine,” he whispered. “But even in my wildest dreams, I could not have imagined such pleasure. You take my breath away, Isabella.”

Her heart lurched with love for him. She couldn’t speak. Sighing, she nestled into his arms, replete with love.

Against all the odds, they had found each other and finally sealed their love. And now, their life together could begin. She knew it was going to be the greatest adventure of them all.

## ***THE END***

*Can't get enough of Isabella and Jasper? Then make sure to check out the  
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*How will things evolve between Jasper and Isabella’s brother, Nathaniel?  
Why will Isabella feel threatened after talking to Timothy and will Jasper  
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How will Jasper react to Isabella’s big revelation and how will it affect the  
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Click the link or enter it into your browser  
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*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first*



chapters from **“Courting A Sinful Stranger”**, my Amazon Best-Selling  
novel!)

Emily Honeyfield

*Courting A  
Sinful  
Stranger*

# Courting A Sinful Stranger

## Introduction

The tempting Lady Sarah Rubyton is tired of acting like a well behaved young lady, only to please her parents that want her settled with a proper, tedious gentleman. Sarah yearns for so much more, secretly lusting for an enthralling adventure... When she attends a masquerade ball, she is allured by the raven-haired seductive stranger, who whispers shockingly tempting things into her ear, without revealing his identity. She knows all this is far from how a lady should behave, but she finds this game of seduction simply irresistible. After all, what hope can a respectable young lady have in finding any kind of tantalizing excitement? While trying to unveil this captivating masquerader's identity, will she indulge in an adventure of inappropriate promises and lustful desire?

Arthur Colton, the Viscount Nordarken, is a bored gentleman, ready to risk it all for the sake of pleasure. While visiting his father in the district, he is on the hunt for a rousing distraction. Sadly, not even one of the eligible young ladies sparks his interest after the whirlwind of excitement that London was. Little did he know that everything was about to change with the announcement of a masquerade ball and the appearance of an enticing dark-eyed beauty into his dangerous path. Being used to always getting what he wants, he comes up with a wicked plan, to make her succumb to his sinful passion. How far is he willing to go in order to conquer her fiery heart?

Against all odds, their lives and their feelings get tangled and challenge everything they have ever known. That is when a game of false identities and flaming desire begins... A game that must end soon, or it could otherwise lead to their destruction. For Sarah it is being in the midst of a scandal and losing her gracious place in society. For Arthur it is being targeted and risking turning into a social pariah. Will an arising old scandal threaten their affair to its very core? Will their untamed passion for one another be enough to thrive, in spite of all the hardships or will they drift apart after all?

## Chapter 1

It was an exceedingly bright summer's evening. Lady Sarah Rubyton found herself squinting as she gazed out of the carriage window, surveying the rolling green hills of the countryside surrounding Bath.

Sighing, she covertly adjusted the neckline of her gown. Was it just a little *too* low, in the décolletage? She glanced at her mother. Lady Rubyton had insisted on this gown and studiously ignored the sweeping neckline. Sarah knew why – her dear mama thought that she would catch rather more admirers with a slightly exposed bust than without. But one did not *say* that, of course.

She sighed again, gazing at her parents, who were sitting opposite her in the carriage. Lady Rubyton was stiffly encased in a peacock blue silk gown, wincing slightly as the carriage's wheels bumped over various potholes on the rough country road. Her corset had obviously been laced too tightly, Sarah reflected. Mama rather had the appearance of a brightly coloured sausage about to split out of its skin. The matching garishly dyed blue feather in her hair jolted from side to side, so high that it brushed against the roof of the carriage.

Her eyes slid to her father who was gazing out of the window, a bit peevishly. A large, bulky man, the Earl of Pembleton always looked uncomfortable in confined spaces such as this. Sarah knew that her dear papa would prefer not to have to attend any social engagements at all, and always suffered mightily when his wife forced him to. Sarah knew that Lord Rubyton would much rather be sitting in his study, idling away the evening, sipping port and perusing his various geological journals.

Lord Rubyton turned to his wife, his dark eyes flashing. "We shall only stay as long as we must, Ann," he snapped. "A dratted ball! I thought

that I would be done with the insufferable things when I secured you, my dear.” He shifted uncomfortably on the seat, pulling at his cravat as if it were choking him.

Lady Rubyton pursed her lips. “Now, Peter,” she said, in a steady voice, “you know that we must do our duty by our daughter.” Her eyes narrowed as she focused on Sarah. “A young lady of marriageable age must socialise, my dear. And it is our responsibility to make sure our Sarah takes full advantage of every opportunity presented to her.”

Sarah’s lips tightened. “You parade me as if I am a pony at auction day,” she snapped, feeling the familiar frustration overwhelm her. “Must I dress up and play the simpering maiden to *all* of the eligible gentlemen in the district?”

Her parents looked astounded.

“You have rather too sharp a tongue on you, my girl,” said her father, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “You are but twenty years of age, with the mouth of a shrew! I do hope you do not have such a loose tongue when you speak with the gentlemen, Sarah.” He turned to his wife, shaking his head dispiritedly, “No wonder we are having such a hard time of it with her, Ann.”

Lady Rubyton sighed heavily. “You do not have to remind me of that, my dear.” She glared at Sarah. “Whatever is wrong with you, Sarah? You know that it is your duty to secure a good match. It is the *only* duty of a young lady. And yet you are always fighting it. Pray, do you want to end up as a *spinster*?”

Sarah stared at her mother. Lady Rubyton had veritably spat the word out, as if it were something loathsome on her tongue. The worst thing

in the world was a lady who missed all her chances and ended up unmarried, sitting in her parents' home forever, like a forgotten ornament gathering dust on a mantelpiece. At least, that was what her parents believed. It was what the whole of good society believed.

Sarah kept staring mutinously at her mother. It wasn't that she wished to end up as an old maid, exactly; it was just that the whole matrimonial game left her cold. Endlessly parading herself before gentlemen in the hope that one would look favourably upon her and pick her out of the crowd.

She was just one of dozens of young ladies always jostling for attention at these social engagements, hoping fervently to catch the eye of a man. It just seemed so...cold blooded.

And the eligible gentlemen were all so dull and boring, Sarah reflected. They were either chinless wonders, barely out of their linen clouts, or else older gentlemen who had missed their chance in their youth. Invariably these older gentlemen were not the most attractive of their ilk, either suffering from physical impediments ranging from cross eyes to hare lips, or seriously lacking conversational skills or charm. The thought of ending up married to any of them made Sarah shudder with revulsion.

The younger gentlemen were not much better. They were like stunned mullets in the firing line, being pushed by their own eager mamas to secure a good match. Not one of them moved Sarah in any way at all. They might as well have been made from stone.

She sighed. Surely, there was more to courtship and marriage than this?



“The eligible gentlemen are all as dull as dishwater,” she declared stoutly. “If I married any of them, I do not know what I would perish from first – childbed or boredom.”

There was a swift intake of shocked breath from both her parents. Sarah bit her lip. Why was she always antagonising them? She hadn’t meant to say it so boldly, but it was as if her tongue had a mind of its own.

“I say,” spluttered her father, turning puce. “That is no way for a young lady to speak! Have you no shame?” He glared at his daughter. “If you were younger you would be feeling the back of my hand for that remark, Sarah. It is rather a pity that you are not.”

Sarah looked shamefaced. “Sorry, Papa,” she mumbled, under her breath.

“I have given you far too much leeway, my girl,” he remonstrated. “Letting you swan around playing the lady of the district, with your pretty new gowns and endless assignations at teasshops with your friends.” He took a deep breath, “It stops now, Sarah. Obviously, a young lady must not have too much freedom for fear it shall go to her head! Your duty in life is to secure a good husband. You need to buckle down and get to the serious work of finding one.”

Lady Rubyton pursed her lips. “Yes. I have clearly been remiss in my duty towards you, daughter, for you to have such a loose tongue and be so unmindful of your responsibilities towards your family.” Her gaze sharpened. “You will no longer turn perfectly good suitors away, Sarah, or refuse any invitations from them. As soon as we get to the Clifford ball, I am filling your dance card with eligible gentlemen.”

Sarah stared at her in dismay. She had rather thought she would spend the evening dodging the gentlemen and giggling in a private corner with her best friend, Lady Mary Marcus, while they stuffed their faces with cream cakes.

“Well done, my dear,” huffed her father, nodding with satisfaction. “That is just the ticket! And I shall add a proviso that Sarah must then pick one to court or I shall take the matter out of her hands entirely and pick one for her.” He shifted again on his seat. “The sooner this matter is resolved, the sooner I do not have to primp myself in these rags and may return to the sweet solitude of my study, pray the Lord.”

Sarah’s heart plummeted. Angry tears filled her eyes. Gloomily, she stared out of the carriage window. The Clifford estate was in view, now; she could see the carriages all lined up in front of it. The ball was obviously in full swing. Within five minutes or less their own carriage would be drawing up at the grand entrance and they would be joining the multitude.

It was promising to be a grand affair. The Cliffords’ annual Midsummer ball. There would be lashings of iced lemonade and champagne, mountains of sweet treats, and a full orchestra for the young ladies and gentlemen whose duty it was to dance. It was all so predictable that Sarah could barely stifle a yawn at the thought of it.

*The same old crowd, she thought dismissively. The same ball, just in a different location. It was all the same. How am I to endure it? Especially now that I shall be forced to dance with every chinless wonder and old doddering fool there is available.*

She shuddered. And to add insult to injury, she must choose one of them to court.

“Sarah?” Her mother was peering at her closely. “Do you understand what you must do this evening?”

“Yes, Mama.” She sighed, picking at the net overlay on her gown dispiritedly. “I must dance and make a choice among the gentlemen.”

Her mother’s eyes flashed. “You are lucky that you have a choice of them, my girl. Be thankful that you are blessed with beauty and have suitors. Not all young ladies are so lucky. Turn your mind upon poor Miss Pickford. You would not wish to be her, would you?”

Sarah bristled. Fanny Pickford was the resident wallflower of the district, never asked for a dance, always wallowing on the side lines gazing wistfully at the dancers. Poor Fanny, indeed. It wasn’t her fault she had slightly buck teeth and a braying laugh and none of the gentlemen found her appealing. But Sarah knew that Fanny was kind and funny and would make any of those men a fine wife.

It wasn’t fair. All Fanny Pickford desired was to be noticed by a gentleman – any gentleman. She wanted to do her duty and marry. Whereas Sarah, who was always spurning them, didn’t want it at all. If only they could swap places. If *she* had buck teeth and a braying laugh perhaps her parents would just resolve themselves to the fact their daughter was not destined for matrimony and leave her alone. Not for the first time she rued the fact that she had been born with looks society deemed acceptable.

The carriage was pulling up. A brightly-liveried footman sprang forward opening the carriage door. They stepped out into the balmy summer night. Sarah gazed around her. The Cliffords had done an impressive job.

The house was festooned with lanterns, glittering like fireflies in the semi darkness. An arch laced with white flowers had been erected for the guests to walk through to the front door. Sarah stifled a giggle as her father swatted away a honeybee intent on landing on his right shoulder. The creature was obviously muddled and late back to its hive.

“Damnable insects,” he muttered, patting his face with a handkerchief as he gazed furiously at the arch. “Whose bright idea was it to drown this thing in flowers?”

They stepped into the foyer. The sound of tinkling laughter and the hum of conversation was audible from the grand hall, as was the sound of Mozart drifting on the air. Sarah took a deep breath for courage. The evening was about to begin and it was not the one she had envisaged. She must dance and she must choose a suitor. It was all so tedious she simply did not know how she would bear it.

*Marriage, she thought contemptuously. What a ruse it is. Only way to keep a lady in her place. Who in their right mind would wish to be shackled to any gentleman?*

But she knew that she had no choice. Her days of dodging her duty were well and truly numbered. And now she must choose the least offensive of them to get her parents off her back. That was just the reality of life for any young lady of good breeding and there was simply nothing to be done about it.

## Chapter 2

Sarah's eyes darted left and right before she gripped Lady Mary Marcus's arm, almost pulling her towards the secluded alcove away from the crowd.

"Quickly," she hissed. "I simply must sit down and rest for a moment, dear Mary, before my parents discover me missing from the dance floor."

Mary giggled. "As you please, dearest. It is all rather fatiguing, is it not?"

"Very," whispered Sarah grimly.

The alcove was blessedly empty when they sat down. Mary had even managed to secure a small plate of sweet treats, which she placed between them. Sarah leaned back, kicking off her slippers. Her mother would be furious with her if she saw but she was past caring for the moment. She needed a rest and she wanted to catch up with her friend.

"You have been energetic this evening," remarked Mary, picking up an éclair. "I do not think I have ever seen you dance so much at a ball."

Sarah snorted. "It is only because my dear mama filled my dance card as soon as we arrived. She is determined that I must pick a suitor. And Papa is backing her to the hilt."

“Poor Sarah,” teased Mary, biting into her treat with relish. “You do know that most of the young ladies would kill to be in your position, do you not? Think of poor Fanny Pickford.”

Sarah’s gaze lingered on the young lady, who was hovering on the edge of the dance floor with a fixed smile on her face, obviously hoping some gentleman would sweep her off to dance a quadrille.

“My mother says exactly the same thing,” said Sarah. She turned to her friend. “I know it is shocking to say, Mary, but sometimes I wish that I was like Fanny. How blessed would it be to just be left to one’s own devices?”

Mary finished her éclair. “You do not mean that, Sarah. You do not truly wish to be like Fanny Pickford, who is destined to be an old maid.” She eyed Sarah thoughtfully. “Do you not want a husband and a home and a family of your own one day?”

Sarah sighed deeply. “It is not that I desire spinsterhood, dear one. It is just that I cannot for the life of me work out why all the young ladies are like bees in a bottle about the gentlemen.” She took a deep breath, “They are all so dull and boring! Imagine having to live with one and endure their frightful countenance forever?”

Mary laughed. “You *are* shocking. But you only say that because you have not met the right one yet, Sarah. My mama told me that when that happens it is like the sun peeking out from behind darkened clouds.” She sounded wistful.

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Do not tell me you have bought into that fairy story as well, Mary. Have you yet met any gentleman who makes you feel such a thing?”

“Well, no,” admitted Mary, picking up a slice of ginger cake. “But that is not to say that it will not happen, my dear. I *do* have hope.”

Sarah sighed again. “I believe that romantic love is just a myth that we are told to make us submit to our destinies,” she mused. “Most matches are pragmatic, Mary. Most of our friends and acquaintances will eventually choose a husband because he can support them well or because he can raise their status in society. Not for love, whatever that is.”

Mary glanced closely at her friend. “I believe in love, dearest. I believe it is possible. I have seen love matches and know it to be true...”

“Infatuation,” interrupted Sarah, waving a hand dismissively. “I have heard of it and seen young ladies in the fierce grip of it. But those same young ladies look rather less pleased after years of putting up with the object of their affection. Especially when they have been turned into a brood mare as well.”

“Sarah!” Mary looked shocked. “It is the natural way, for us to become mothers. It is the ultimate joy in life. What else is there, after all?”

Sarah shrugged. She didn’t have an answer for her friend. It wasn’t as if a young lady could do anything else with her life. There was only one choice: marriage and children. A spinster was a despised thing, existing on the fringes of other people’s lives, and with no control over her own life at all. It wasn’t as if a spinster could make her way in the world like a bachelor could. There was one rule for gentlemen and

quite another for ladies.

“I know,” she said despairingly. “I know you are right, Mary. It is just that it irritates me that I am being forced to choose a mate from such an uninspiring pool. I have danced with just about all the eligible gentlemen here this evening and they are so insipid. They make polite conversation about suitable topics and do not even listen to my replies.” She took a deep breath, “All they want is a good society marriage. A pretty lady as a wife on their arm who should also be endowed with a suitable fortune. None of them truly see or hear me.”

Mary blinked rapidly. “Perhaps your expectations are too high, dearest. Or perhaps you have just not met the right gentleman yet...”

“What does it matter?” burst out Sarah. “The sand has reached the bottom of the hourglass and my time is up. My parents insist that I must choose a suitor.” She glanced at the crowd milling beyond them. “The ball is nearly over and every single gentleman I have danced with thus far is lacking in some way or other. I do not want any of them as a suitor and yet I must pick one of them.”

“The night is not over yet, dearest,” said Mary, patting her arm. “You have not danced with Lord Frankland yet...he is rather dashing...”

“He likes his own reflection just a little too much,” scoffed Sarah. “Have you not seen him preening himself in front of any window when he has a chance?”

Mary giggled. “What of Mr. Lumley? Amy Worthington says that he is a skilled conversationalist.”



Sarah rolled her eyes again. “A gentleman who drones on about his horses and his hounds. I am almost falling to sleep just thinking about him.”

“Lord Cavell?”

“A poser,” declared Sarah stoutly. “I declare that he would not look amiss amongst the finest dandies on Bond Street in London.”

“Sarah, you *are* wicked,” giggled Mary. “You are very harsh on the poor gentlemen.”

Sarah shrugged. “I am only telling the truth, dear Mary. You would not consider any of them, would you?”

Mary shook her head. “But then, I do not have your beauty and charm, Sarah,” she said. “The gentlemen do not buzz around me like bees around a honeypot as they do you. Even if I was inclined towards any of them, I think they would barely notice me.”

“You do yourself a disservice, Mary,” said Sarah, frowning. “You are perfectly lovely and very amiable. It is only your confidence in yourself that needs work, my dear friend.”

Mary blushed, staring down at the plate. Sarah resisted reaching across and taking her friend’s hand in her own. She knew that it would only embarrass Mary.

She gazed warmly at the slightly younger woman. She had been best friends with Lady Mary Marcus since they were girls, growing up on neighbouring estates. When they were little, they would ride their ponies together and host grand tea parties for their collections of dolls and bears. Mary was always the shyer of the pair, trailing in Sarah's shadow, but their affection for each other had only deepened over time.

Two years ago, tragedy had struck her dear friend's life. Her parents had been killed in a carriage accident, making Mary an orphan. It was only because her only sibling James was older and had reached his majority, inheriting the earldom of Tolmere from his late father, that she had stayed in her own home and not been farmed out to a distant relative. James was unconventional and allowed Mary a great deal of freedom. Her friend had no pressure on her to secure a marriage like Sarah did.

Sarah smiled slightly. She liked James. He was like the older brother that she had never had, teasing her mercilessly whenever he saw her. And Lord Tolmere also had the courage to live his life exactly as he wished, even if he was an earl. He filled Tolmere Manor with bohemians and artists from London and seemed in no hurry to take a wife. In fact, Sarah could not recall him ever courting a young lady at all.

"You are the sweetest friend, Sarah," said Mary, colouring slightly. "You only say such a thing because you like me. But I do despair that I shall never make a good match. James does not push me like Mama would have done if she was still with us and sometimes, I feel like a boat with no rudder..."

Sarah's heart tightened. "Mama loves you like another daughter, Mary. If you ever need advice from an older lady about anything, I know she would be more than happy to guide you."

Mary smiled faintly. "I esteem Lady Rubyton. But she is busy with you, Sarah. She does not have time to advise me on gowns and etiquette."

"Fiddlesticks," said Sarah briskly. "You must come and stay more often, Mary. Mama will delight in taking you under her wing." Her face darkened. "She will probably think you a far more docile study in how to be a proper lady than I."

Mary opened her mouth to protest, but Sarah gripped her arm tightly, shaking her head.

"Do not breathe a word," she whispered, her eyes fixed to the crowd. "Mama is on the warpath. She must have noticed that I am not on the dancefloor."

Her mother was pushing through the crowd, her face full of thunder. She was dragging a gentleman in her wake. Sarah's heart sank. It was Lord Maxwell, the next gentleman on her dance card. A man of eight and thirty with a balding pate and bulging eyes. Lord Maxwell also had an unfortunate habit of laughing inanely at everything, even if it wasn't funny in the slightest.

"By Jove's beard," swore Sarah, hastily putting on her slippers, "it seems our idyll is over, Mary. I must dance with the dreadful Lord Maxwell."

"He is not so very bad," declared Mary unconvincingly.

Sarah sighed heavily. She did not even bother to contradict her friend. They both knew the truth. If only this night would end, she thought fervently.

She was already on her feet, walking towards her mother and the gentleman like a condemned prisoner towards the noose when there was a sudden shushing of the crowd. The host, Lord Clifford, was addressing the guests.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he boomed, a smile playing on his lips. “Our evening has almost reached its conclusion. But before you all depart, Lady Clifford and I have a surprise in store.” His eyes twinkled. “We believe it a fun finale to the night, dear guests. We hope you think so, too.”

He held up his hand. He was clutching a white masquerade mask. The crowd spontaneously started clapping.

Sarah turned excitedly to Mary. “A masquerade! Oh, what fun!”

“There are enough masks for all,” smiled Lord Clifford. “Please, ladies and gentlemen, take one and become someone else entirely. Become whoever you wish to be.” He paused dramatically, his eyes twinkling wickedly. “At least for the next dance.”

Sarah gripped Mary’s hand, veering right, away from where her mother and Lord Maxwell were standing.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Let us get masks. This is the only exciting

part of the evening. And I shall not waste it dancing with Lord Maxwell, to be sure.”

## Chapter 3

Ten minutes prior to Lord Clifford's surprise announcement, Arthur Colton, the Viscount Nordarken, was sipping his champagne as he gazed around the ballroom with eyes frosted over with boredom. It was always like this when he socialised on his infrequent visits to Bath to visit his father. He was rather more used to the constant buzz of London society.

He turned to his friend, Captain John Morgan, who was standing by his side, sipping his own champagne.

"How on earth do you endure it, Morgan?" he muttered, shaking his head ruefully. "It is all so very tedious."

Captain Morgan smiled slightly. "Are you already yearning for the sparkle of London, my friend? You have only been in the district for two days."

"Two days too long," declared Arthur, draining his champagne. "Can you remind me again of why I let you drag me to this infernal ball in the sticks? It does not even have the allure of being held in Bath." He took a deep breath, "At least in that venerable city we might have skulked away to end the night at a club."

Captain Morgan sighed heavily. "You are very difficult to please nowadays, Lord Nordarken. I declare that London has given you the attention span of a gnat. The Clifford Midsummer ball is one of the prime events of the season." His eyes narrowed. "Why are you not sampling all of the lovely young ladies on offer? I thought you would have been filling dance cards left, right and centre."

Arthur pondered this question, his eyes sweeping over the assembly. His friend was not lying – there were many pretty looking young ladies in attendance. He was vaguely acquainted with a few of them from his other visits to the area over the years ever since his father, the Earl of Halwell, had decided quite abruptly to buy a townhouse and spend most of his time in this area. The Earl had declared that he was heartily sick of London and that the waters of Bath would be beneficial in managing his rheumatism.

Arthur had hardly questioned his father's decision. It meant that the enormous house on Grosvenor Square in London could become his very own bachelor pad. He spent his time attending a dizzying array of social engagements, even when the official season was over and the ton deserted the city in droves. He had a very exciting life there indeed. So exciting, in fact, that perhaps it had spoiled him for any other place in England.

He took another glass of champagne from a passing servant. "There are some tolerable young ladies in attendance," he stated thoughtfully, "but they all have the look of the fresh-faced milkmaid about them. I am used to rather more sophisticated ladies in London, my friend."

"You are harsh on our local ladies, indeed," laughed Captain Morgan.

Arthur shrugged. "I just say it as I find it, Morgan. I run in far more cosmopolitan circles, and the ladies are so very beautiful and chic that these country ladies seem insufferably boring by comparison." He sipped his champagne. "It is not just the look of them, my friend. When I try to make conversation with any of them, they titter like sparrows and drone on about their infernal gowns and papa's horses. They do not have any of the conversational skills of the London ladies in my acquaintance, who can quite comfortably talk of art, literature and even philosophy."

Captain Morgan shrugged helplessly. "What can I say? The young ladies of this district are not taught to be cultured free-thinkers, my friend. Their parents would never allow such a thing. They are taught to know their place and to quickly secure a matrimonial match. It is hardly their fault they are not familiar with a wide range of topics and quite frankly most of the gentlemen in this district are quite happy with that."

"I do not blame them for it," said Arthur, shrugging as well. "It just leaves me cold, that is all. They are all so very proper and conventional."

"Very good qualities in a wife though, would you not agree?" Captain Morgan gazed steadily at his friend. "I know that your father is pressuring you ever so slightly to settle down, and a country lady might be just the ticket."

Arthur grimaced. "My father might be dropping hints about matrimony with the subtlety of a hammer, my friend, but that does not mean that I am ready for such a thing." He grinned. "Anything I can get in the marital bed I can get through other means. Why pay for the cow when the milk is free-flowing?"

Captain Morgan laughed outright. "You are a cad, Nordarken! I think any young lady must tremble for her virtue around you, my friend."

Arthur laughed as well. "I am always a gentleman, Morgan. Any lady who comes to my bed does so completely willingly. I do not seduce trembling maidens who might turn and rue the fact afterwards." He paused. "I never have, and I never will."



“Lord Nordarken.” A female voice, high and fluttery.

He turned around hastily. A middle-aged lady was standing there, gripping the arm of a younger one probably in her late teens or early twenties. They were obviously mother and daughter. They had the same aquiline noses and small, darting, hazel-coloured eyes. The younger one smiled, exposing a row of sharp, almost feline looking teeth.

He suppressed a shudder. They were not a handsome pair. But they were obviously well bred and wealthy, judging by the quality of their dress and accoutrements. Very expensive diamonds dangled from the lobes of the young lady and there was a veritable fortune of them hanging around her neck.

He bowed slightly. “Madam.”

“Pray, do you not remember me, My Lord?” continued the middle-aged lady, in the same breathless voice. “I am Lady Danvers. We were introduced at the Tomkins soiree a year ago. May I introduce my daughter, Penelope?”

“Oh, of course, Lady Danvers,” said Arthur quickly, trying to place the lady. He couldn’t recall ever having met her before. He turned to her daughter, bowing. “And Lady Penelope.”

“My Lord,” said Lady Penelope, sweeping into a curtsy.

“May I introduce my friend, Captain John Morgan,” continued Arthur. “Captain Morgan is currently on leave from active service in France.”

“A soldier,” said Lady Danvers, smiling benignly at Captain Morgan. “How perfectly exciting.”

There was an awkward pause. Both ladies were gazing at him expectantly.

*Damnation, thought Arthur. They are wanting me to ask Lady Penelope to dance. How can I get out of it without causing offence?*

But just at that moment, there was a rustle amongst the crowd, who were all turning towards the front of the room. Lord Clifford, the host for the evening, had stood up and was speaking. With relief, Arthur turned around as well. A reprieve, at least for the moment.

As Lord Clifford spoke, a slow smile spread over Arthur’s face. At last, some excitement. An impromptu masquerade. Eagerly, he pushed through the crowd to retrieve a mask from one of the servants. Maybe it wasn’t going to be such a dull evening in the Bath district after all.

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Having secured his mask to his face, Arthur slid into the crowd without looking at anyone. He would wait on the side lines until everyone who was so inclined had secured a mask and then slip back into the mix to make his choice.

He felt a frisson of excitement shudder down his spine. Masquerade balls were one of his favourite forms of entertainment. He loved the anonymity the masks gave everyone. Masquerade balls had been raised to a fine art in London. They were often themed, and could turn rather risqué. Only two weeks ago he had attended one at a grand Regent Street townhouse where everyone had been in ancient Roman attire. Togas and vestal virgins had abounded. It had been a great romp.

He watched the crowd covertly. There was an expectant air in the room. Those that did not wish to partake were hastily leaving the main room, with disapproval on their faces. Most were older ladies and gentlemen who thought the sport immoral. They did not like that the young people could freely mingle and dance without proper introductions. Why, their precious sons and daughters could be dancing with *anyone*.

*That is part of the excitement, thought Arthur, grinning to himself, a chance to be someone not quite yourself. The endless possibilities...*

He slid into the crowd, weaving amongst them, his eyes as keen as a hawk. Suddenly, he spied a tall lady with gold ringlets, dressed in a glaring magenta gown. Her face was covered in a lacy white mask, but he could clearly discern the features of Miss Diana Harrington. He smiled slowly. Diana was the bluestocking daughter of an old associate of his, Mr. Edwin Harrington, who frequented London's gambling dens. Harrington happened to owe him quite a bit of coin from the card table. Perhaps he could ascertain where exactly her father was to shake him a bit. As well as having a bit of fun on the way. Diana was a free thinker, believing in the emancipation of women in *all* areas of life.

She was also rather gorgeous.

He struck out towards her determinedly. If only he had known that Diana was in attendance this evening, it might not have been so dull in other ways. A private walk in the gardens, beneath the moonlight before whisking her into a secluded spot...?

But just as he was almost upon the lady, his vision was arrested by another who had strayed into his path. He stopped short with a jolt, gazing upon her.

She was of average height with a lithe figure. Long arms, and a swan-like neck. A tumble of glossy, caramel coloured curls framed her face and her skin was flawless with a slightly rosy tint to it. She was dressed in a lilac silk gown which emphasised her creamy bust, which was almost spilling from her neckline. At that moment, she turned warm, brown eyes the exact shade of melted chocolate towards him, regarding him almost quizzically. She was wearing a black mask which completely obscured most of her face.

His heart stopped beating for just a fraction of a second as he beheld her.

*She is so luscious, he thought. Those eyes. An invitation to sin.*

Abruptly all thoughts of Miss Diana Harrington drifted out of his mind entirely.

Her chin tilted upright as she opened her fan, waving it in front of her face. With a slightly disdainful glance at him, she turned away.

*Haughty too. A challenge?*

He simply could not resist.

He stepped forward quickly, blocking her path.

“Madam,” he said, bowing low and ostentatiously. “You are like an angel fallen from heaven itself.” A pause as his eyes swept over her almost insolently. “A most divine creature indeed. Can I persuade you to dance...just for a little while?”

Her chocolate brown eyes widened with surprise. He saw the hesitation within her. This young lady was obviously not used to being addressed in such a blatantly sensual manner. Would she slap his face and march in the opposite direction? He braced himself for the sting.

But it never came. Instead, she took a deep breath as if for courage and nodded slowly.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. “Yes, I shall dance with you.”

He felt a stab of triumph. Before she could change her mind, he held out his arm to her and swept her onto the dancefloor, just as the orchestra started playing the last song of the evening.

There were couples everywhere, safely anonymous in their masks. Fittingly, it was a waltz. The most intimate of dances, and the most

perfect excuse to pull a lady just that little bit closer.

Arthur didn't hesitate for a moment. With another shiver of excitement, he drew the young lady close and spun her around the floor.

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